

4

「熾天の杯」
東出祐一郎
イラスト 近衛乙嗣

Fate Apocrypha

フレイド アポクリファ

The sage cries out, "Open, Gates of Heaven. Bless us and bestow miracles upon us!"



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CLASS

Saber

Master *Shishigou Kairi*

True Name *Mordred*

Gender *Female*

Height *154cm*
Weighth *42kg*

Alignment *Chaotic Neutral*



CLASS SKILLS

Magic Resistance : B Cancel spells with a chant below three verses. Even if targeted by High-Thaumaturgy and Greater Rituals, it is difficult for her to be harmed.

Riding : B Capable of skillfully riding all vehicles and beasts except those of the Monstrous Beast and Holy Beast rank.

Personal Skills

Instinct: B

The ability to always “feel” the most favorable developments for oneself during battle. Halves the effect of obstructions that interfere with sight and hearing.

Prana Burst: A

An increase in performance by infusing prana into one’s weapons or body and then instantly expelling it. Simply put, a jet burst achieved through prana. She possesses the raw power to exchange equal blows with the King of Knights.

Battle Continuation: B

Doesn't know when to give up and die. By not giving up even when she was pierced by a holy lance, she managed to deal a fatal blow to the King of Knights.

Charisma: C-

The natural talent to command an army. Increases the abilities of her army during group battle. A rare talent. Mordred's Charisma shows its true worth when she rebels against the system.

Noble Phantasm

Secret of Pedigree

Helm of Hidden Infidelity

Rank: C Type: Anti-Unit (Self) Noble Phantasm
Range: - Maximum number of targets: 1 person

The helm that Mordred received from her mother Morgan along with the words "Never take it off". It masks information connected to her true name like her personal skills and Noble Phantasms listed within her status info. However, she has to remove the helm when releasing the full power of "Clarent".

Clarent

Radiant Sword of the King

Rank: C Type: Anti-Unit Noble Phantasm
Range: 1 Maximum number of targets: 1 person

The sword that demonstrates the right of succession to the throne, formerly stored in King Arthur's armory. Described as "more dazzling than any silver", it is a treasured sword that possesses a worth that exceeds or at least isn't inferior to that of the "Golden Sword of the Victorious", but its rank is lower than it normally should be since Mordred stole it without acknowledgement.

Clarent Blood Arthur

Rebellion Against My Beautiful Father

Rank: A+ Type: Anti-Army Noble Phantasm
Range: 1~50 Maximum number of targets: 800 people

The form "Clarent" takes when its full power is released. It was originally a radiant and beautiful silver sword, but it is dyed in dark red blood and is twisted into an ugly form upon its activation. It is a demonic sword of calamity that fires off the raging hatred that clads the blade.

CLASS

Lancer

Master *Shirou Kotomine*

True Name *Karna*

Gender *Male*

Height *178cm*
Weight *65kg*

Alignment *Lawful Good*

STR  **B**

MGI  **B**

END  **C**

LCK  **D**

AGI  **A**

NP  **EX**

CLASS SKILLS

Magic Resistance : **C** Cancel spells with a chant below two verses. Cannot defend against Magecraft on the level of High-Thaumaturgy and Greater Rituals. However, his resistance is not limited to this when he receives the effect of his golden armor Noble Phantasm.

Personal Skills

Discernment of the Poor: A

The insight to see through the opponent's character and attributes. He cannot be deceived by excuses and deceptions through words. It expresses the power to grasp the opponent's true nature possessed by Karna, who was blessed with the opportunity to inquire about the life and value of the weak due to being someone without a single relative.

Riding: A

Capable of skillfully riding all vehicles and beasts except those of the Phantasmal Beast and Divine Beast rank.

Uncrowned Arms Mastership: -

Arms competency that was not recognized by others due various reasons. To opponents, the rank of Karna's sword, spear, bow, Riding and Divinity appears to be one degree lower than what they actually are. If his true name is revealed, this effect will be terminated.

Prana Burst (Flames): A

An increase in performance by infusing one's weapons or body with prana and then instantly expelling it. In Karna's case, blazing flames become prana to dwell in the weapon he uses.

Divinity: A

As the son of the sun god Surya who became one with Surya after death, Karna has high Divine Spirit aptitude. This Divine Spirit aptitude manifests as high defensive power against sun god-type Heroic Spirits with a Divinity rank of B or lower.

Noble Phantasm

Kavacha and Kundala

O Surya, Become Armor

Rank: A Type: Anti-Unit (Self) Noble Phantasm
Range: - Maximum number of targets: 1 person

The golden armor and earrings that Karna's mother Kunti gave to him after feeling fear in becoming an unmarried mother and praying to Surya to protect her son. They are a powerful defensive-type Noble Phantasm that emit the radiance of the sun. Due to being light itself given form, this Noble Phantasm is difficult to destroy even for gods. It is integrated into Karna's body.

Brahmastra Kundala

O Brahma, Curse Me

Rank: A+ Type: Anti-Country Noble Phantasm
Range: 2~90 Maximum number of targets: 600 people

An Anti-Country Noble Phantasm that Karna received from Parashurama of the Brahmin. If he is summoned into the Archer class, it manifests as a bow, and if he is summoned into any other class, it manifests as a different form of projectile weapon. Its attack, bestowed with the sweltering heat effect of Karna's attribute, is comparable to a nuclear weapon.



CLASS

Archer

Master *Shirou Kotomine*

True Name *Atalanta*

Gender *Female*

Height *166cm*
Weight *57kg*

Alignment *Neutral Evil*



CLASS SKILLS

Magic Resistance : D Cancel Single-Action spells. Magic Resistance of the same degree of an amulet that rejects prana.

Independent Action : A Capable of acting even in the absence of a Master. However, to use Noble Phantasms that require great prana consumption, back up from Master is necessary.

Personal Skills

Crossing Arcadia: B

Capable of moving while jumping over all kinds of obstacles on the field, including enemies.



Aesthetics of the Last Spurt: C

Capable of anticipating the enemy and then acting accordingly by letting them take the initiative and then confirming their actions.

Noble Phantasm

Phoebus Catastrophe

Complaint Message on the Arrow

Rank: B

Type: Anti-Army Noble Phantasm

Range: 2~50

Maximum number of targets: 100 people

This Noble Phantasm involves Atalanta firing an arrow affixed with a letter requesting divine protection from Apollo and Artemis using “Bow of Heaven”, which she received from her guardian deity Artemis. Each turn, a rain of arrows will pour down and perform an attack on all combatants. Designating its range is also possible.

^{Tauropolos}



CLASS

Rider

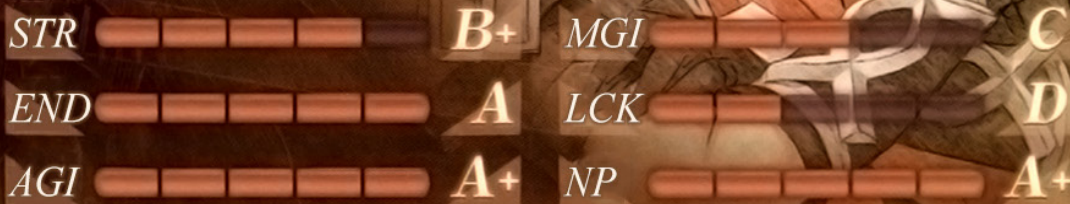
Master *Shirou Kotomine*

True Name *Achilles*

Gender *Male*

Height *185cm*
Weight *97kg*

Alignment *Lawful Neutral*



CLASS SKILLS

Magic Resistance

: C

Cancel spells with a chant below two verses.
Cannot defend against Magecraft on the level of High-Thaumaturgy and Greater Rituals.

Riding

: A+

The expertise to ride animals and vehicles. Creatures on the level of Phantasmal Beast and Divine Beast can be used as mounts. However, this does not apply to members of the Dragon Kind.



Personal Skills

Battle Continuation: A

Doesn't know when to give up and die.
He still continued fighting for a while even after his Achilles tendon, his supposed weak point, and his heart had been shot through with arrows.

Bravery: A+

The ability to negate mental interference such as pressure, confusion and fascination. Also has the bonus effect of increasing melee damage.

Affections of the Goddess: B

The affections he receives from his mother, the goddess Thetis.
Receives a Rank-Up for all his stats excluding Mana and Luck.

Divinity: C

He is the son of the sea goddess Thetis and the human hero Peleus.



Noble Phantasm

Troias Tragoidia

Tempestuous Immortal Chariot

Rank: A

Type: Anti-Army Noble Phantasm

Range: 2~60

Maximum number of targets: 50 people

A three-horsed war chariot. It is drawn by two immortal divine horses bestowed upon him by the sea god Poseidon and a famous fine horse he pillaged from a city. The chariot tramples through the battlefield with their divine speed. It deals additional damage proportionate to its increase in speed. At its highest speed, it is just like a giant dashing lawnmower.

Dromeus Cometes

Comet Form

Rank: A+

Type: Anti-Unit (Self) Noble Phantasm

Range: -

Maximum number of targets: 1 person

A continuously active Noble Phantasm triggered by stepping off of "Troias Tragoidia". It embodies the legend of how he was the fastest among all heroes of all eras. He can run through a giant battlefield in a single breath, and obstacles on the field will not slow his speed. It forces him to keep his weak point, his Achilles tendon, exposed, but there are few Heroic Spirits that can catch up to his speed.

Andres Amarantos

Amaranth of the Brave

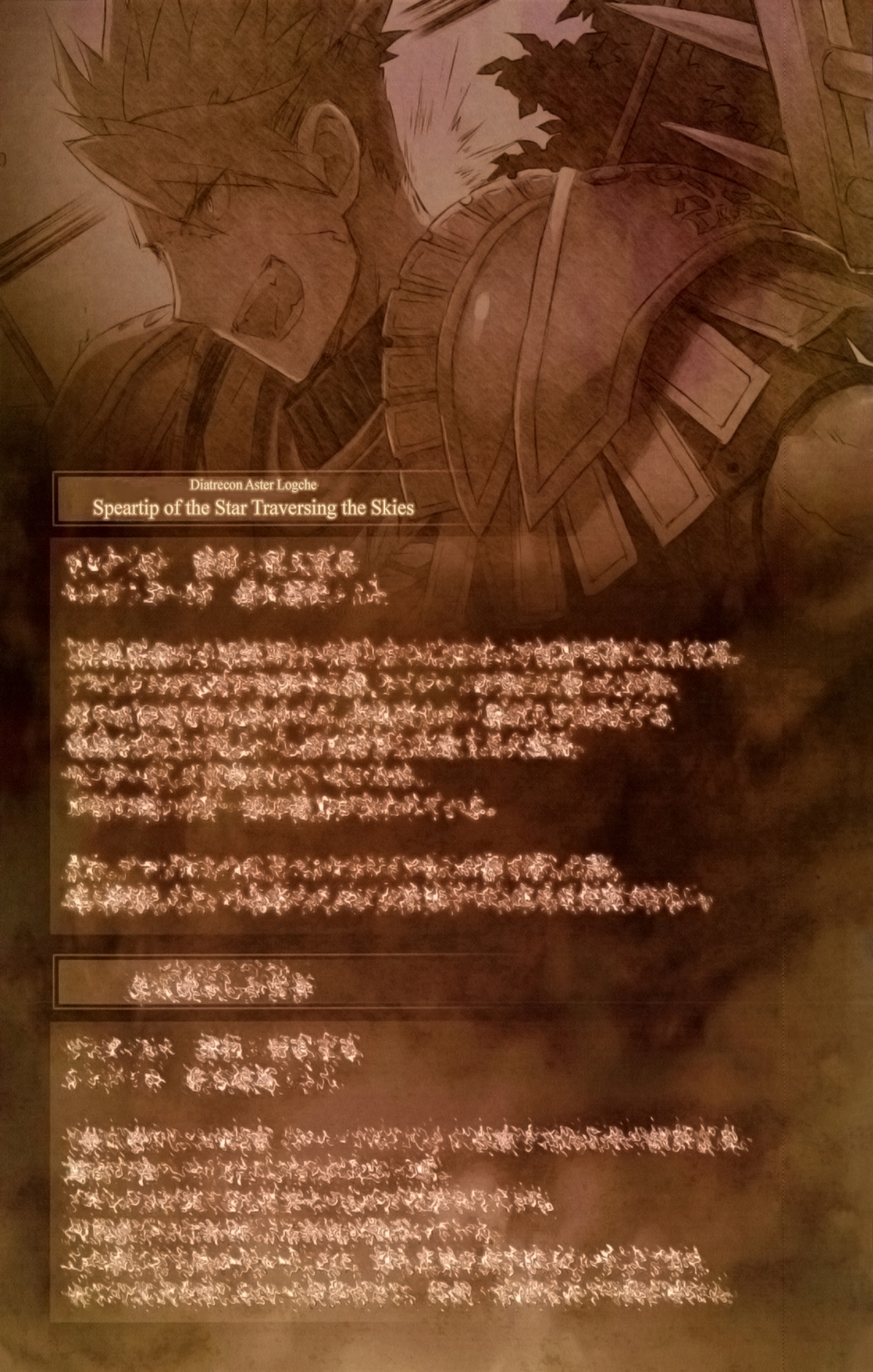
Rank: B

Type: Anti-Unit (Self) Noble Phantasm

Range: -

Maximum number of targets: 1 person

The blessing of immortality that his body received from his mother the goddess Thetis, excluding his heel. Any type of attack is canceled against him, but this effect can be negated by those with the Divinity skill of a certain rank or higher.



Diatrecon Aster Logche

Speartip of the Star Traversing the Skies

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CLASS

Caster

Master *Shirou Kotomine*

True Name *Shakespeare*

Gender *Male*

Height *180cm*
Weigh *75kg*

Alignment *True Neutral*

STR		E	MGI		C++
END		E	LCK		B
AGI		D	NP		C+

CLASS SKILLS

Territory Creation	: C	The skill to build a special terrain that is advantageous to oneself as a magus. But what he creates isn't a workshop, but a "Study" to write stories.
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Item Construction	: -	This skill is lost due to his "Enchant" skill.
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Personal Skills

Enchant: A

The bestowal of ideas. He can add powerful functions to others and the important items possessed by others. An enhancement ability fundamentally used for making the Masters fight. He irritates the Masters by watching a battle as a spectator and enquiring about their psychological state.

Self-Preservation: B

In exchange for having absolutely no combat abilities of his own, he can escape from nearly all danger as long as his Master is safe. In other words, he himself never fights at all. And yet he likes “high risk, high return” tactics.

Noble Phantasm

First Folio

Let the Curtains Rise to Thunderous Applause

Rank: B

Type: Anti-Unit Noble Phantasm

Range: 1~30

Maximum number of targets: 1 person



CLASS

Assassin

Master *Shirou Kotomine*

True Name *Semiramis*

Gender *Female*

Height *169cm*
Weight *51kg*

Alignment *Lawful Evil*

STR		E	MGI		A
END		D	LCK		A
AGI		D	NP		B

CLASS SKILLS

Presence Concealment : C+ Capable of cutting off her presence as a Servant. Suitable for covert action. The rank of Presence Concealment drops considerably when preparing to attack. However, this condition does not apply to poisoning something or someone.

Territory Creation : EX The skill to build a special terrain that is advantageous to oneself as a magus. By gathering specific materials, it is possible to create the “Aerial Gardens of Vanity”, superior to a “Temple”.
Hanging Gardens of Babylon

Item Construction : C Capable of creating devices that carry prana. Semiramis specializes in poisons, so she can't make any other types of tools.



Personal Skills

Familiar (Doves): D

Allows the use of doves as familiars.
They can be directed by thought alone, without need for a contract.

Double Summon: B

She is summoned with the class skills of both the Assassin and Caster classes. A rare personal skill possessed only by a select few Servants.

Divinity: C

Semiramis was the daughter of the Syrian fish-goddess Derketo and a human man.



Noble Phantasm

Hanging Gardens of Babylon
Aerial Gardens of Vanity

Rank: EX Type: Anti-World Noble Phantasm
Range: 10~100 Maximum number of targets: 1000 people

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon. In reality, Semiramis had nothing to do with the construction of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. But by using the beliefs of the many people who misunderstood this, it has become her Noble Phantasm.

Since it is “vanity” itself, the activation conditions of this Noble Phantasm are strict. By transporting a fixed amount of rock and soil from ruins in the vicinity of Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, and then putting these materials together to build it, the preparations to activate it will finally be complete.

Just as the name suggests, it manifests as an “enormous fortress hanging in the air”. And while within this fortress, all of Semiramis’ stats receive a Rank-Up. Her fame level is also boosted to the highest class, and furthermore, attacks will be revised in her favor.



「……」

「……」

「……」

CLASS

Berserker

Master -

True Name *Spartacus*

Gender *Male*

Height *221cm*
Weight *165kg*

Alignment *True Neutral*

STR 

A

MGI 


E

END 

EX

LCK 

D

AGI 

D

NP 

C

CLASS SKILLS

Mad Enhancement : EX Rank up for the parameters, but robs most of reason. Even while under Mad Enhancement, Spartacus can hold conversations, but he is fixated with thoughts of “always making the most difficult choices”, and in practice it is impossible to a mutual understand of intentions with him.

Personal Skills

Honor of the Battered: B

When Spartacus' body as a Servant is healed by means of magecraft, the required prana cost is reduced to a quarter of what is normally necessary. Also, even without the use of magecraft, his wounds will heal automatically each time a fixed interval of time passes.





Noble Phantasm

Crying Warmonger

Howl of the Wounded Beast

Rank: A

Type: Anti-Unit (Self) Noble Phantasm

Range: -

Maximum number of targets: 1 person

A permanently active Noble Phantasm.

He can convert part of the damage he receives from enemies into prana and accumulate it in his body. The prana accumulated in his body can be used to boost Spartacus' abilities.

If he faces powerful Servants, even his body itself would likely end up transforming.



Then, then... You aren't a saint...!







I don't understand... anything.

"...Before grumbling about other things, let's eat first, okay?"

"All right."

"Good idea."



Original Author



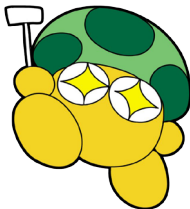
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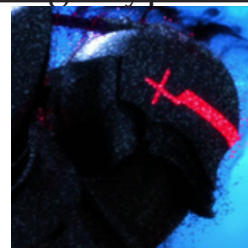
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Prologue

—Only nineteen years. The entirety of my life didn't even span two decades.

If I were to condense my life, I would say that it was those last two years, starting from when I left my home village of Domrémy at the age of seventeen, that were everything to me.

It consisted of one year of glory and one year of abasement and torture.

Some called me a 'girl of miracles'.

Is this really a miracle, I wonder?

I took action after hearing God's laments, and I fought while following my heart in order to take back my homeland.

Yes, I fought. Even if my duty was merely to wave a flag on the battlefield, it still meant that I had chosen to kill people. In order to save hundreds of my countrymen, I killed thousands of enemies.

Even if they were enemies, who would have killed me instead if given the chance—murder is still murder.

I broke the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'. Murder is an act that is cruel beyond imagination.

Therefore, most humans who have been burdened with the same fate have thought of it as thus:

'Enemies aren't human. They are demons, evil fiends who starve for blood, and killing them is just, so we kill them out of contempt. Or we kill out of the belief that it is for the sake of our country, our birthplace, or for those we love.'

It is a necessary act. A deed that should be blessed.

Thinking that way, people desperately continue to avert their eyes... if they don't, they can't keep living.

If they realize that the 'strangers' who face them as enemies are ordinary humans who also love their family and country, and yet continue killing even so, eventually their hearts will break—

I was foolish, ignorant, and helplessly bad at telling lies.

That's why—I thought of my enemies as humans. Demons are scary, evil fiends are terrifying, but I wasn't scared of humans. There was just a pain inside me that seemed to mince apart my heart.

Kill people and save people. I believed that there was no method to save my birthplace besides that. I believed, I took an oath, and without repenting, I annihilated the enemy.

The 'history' of the world is entangled like a spiral. You're unable to see the start of it no matter how far you go; its form is beyond absurd, and no matter how many thousands of lives are wasted, it doesn't end, like some kind of comedy.

You kill because others were killed. You get killed because you killed others. It has to be stopped somehow, but no method to stop it can be found. A spiral that continues on eternally—

Even so. Even so, I chose the path of killing. This path, though vague and indistinct, leads forward. I know that the blood I spilled will lead on to a new path. I know that it will lead to a path that ends with no one's blood being spilled.

...I truly was a complete fool as I moved forward while carrying that pain.

People called my sinful and bloodstained self a saint. I had to shoulder that title for my entire life—how terrifying.

If I shouted 'That's wrong', everything would end. But it wouldn't be an end of salvation, but merely an act that threw away what I had been burdened with.

That's why I continued to shoulder it. I shouldered the people's hopes and wishes and earnestly pushed forward.

I understood. I knew from long ago that I would fall into ruin. Did I still continue forward for the sake of my homeland? For their hopes and wishes? Or, or...

Was it because I thought that *I'm a sinner who should be punished*?

What came was not a conclusion that would bring anyone happiness, but a conclusion that was fitting for a war where everyone wounded each other and hated each other.

Burning at the stake was fitting for someone stained in blood like myself.

I don't mind if others sneer at my pitiful figure and heap mockery and abuse on me.

So I shall pray. Just pray and look at the heavens above. After all, only a foolish and insignificant country girl is dying. An unremarkable event buried within history.

Thus, I thought. Even now that I'm a [Heroic Spirit] who many people believe in—I am still merely a foolish country girl.

...Even so, this Holy Grail War is too irregular in all respects.

This is a unique situation where more than ten Servants have been summoned and where two groups of seven Servants each are fighting each other. And yet, there was an error in the summoning of myself, Jeanne, as Ruler, and I had to enlist the aid of a girl named Laetitia.

The cause of this was the most irregular factor in the Great Holy Grail War—Amakusa Shirou Tokisada.

I, who should have originally acted as a mediator, no longer exist to watch over this war, but to settle things with him.

And there is one other person, who is both the smallest yet greatest irregular factor in this Great Holy Grail War.

Not even given a name, having received a short life and yet struggling to live even so, he is a homunculus who possesses a jewel-like beauty and a human-like distortion.

Everything else, including the battle between the fourteen Servants and the existence of the other Ruler, fades away in the face of his peculiarity.

In the first place, a homunculus is a being manufactured to accomplish a task. Holding no doubts over what they do, they readily obey their master's orders forever. Moreover, he is a type whose ability to even think is unsteady from birth.

His type revitalizes prana with their Magic Circuits and supplies it to Servants through a spiritual pipe.

Both words and thought are unnecessary for them. They are merely allowed to exist. In exchange for that, they are victims from birth who are continuously exploited.

'He' escaped from there.

Trembling in fear, frightened in despair, he wished to live—and crawled out from that prana supply tank.

He, who should have simply been buried away within the world, became an abnormal existence in that instance. To be able to live—for him, that in itself is already an *abnormal ability*.

And in the brief time that he tried to run away with Rider of Black's aid, his heart was destroyed, and he fell into a state on the verge of death.

The one who saved him was the famous hero Siegfried from the [Song of the Nibelungs]. Having been summoned as Saber of Black, he gave his own heart to the homunculus.

...The reason for why he did so is uncertain even now. However, Rider, who witnessed his death, heard him whisper his last words.

—*Yeah, this is a good end.*

Satisfied, Siegfried freely gave out his own life. A homunculus, who shouldn't even have had a name, received many *blessings* and managed to survive.

He had such a bright and promising life ahead of him. He had overcome despair and managed to attain hope.

And yet, he returned to *this side*.

Of course, it was by his own choice. That was an undisputable fact. So, naturally, I should have just viewed and judged him impartially.

But I couldn't do that. No matter how I tried, I couldn't view him that way.

One girl within me thought that it was love at first sight. That I had been helplessly charmed by the nobility of the path he chose despite its danger.

...The other girl didn't think that it was love. She thought that the impulse to protect him was from a revelation that said, *it's necessary*.

Either way, the homunculus who named himself Sieg and I decided to work together—

Sharing a mutual interest, we ended up fighting together.

In response to that, half of me rejoiced in love—and the other half of me ached in sin and doubt.

Why did I choose to work together with him and swear to protect him? Was that truly due to my feelings? Or was it—

I threw away those thoughts that, on countless occasions, flickered through my mind. Not knowing the answer, I shelved the matter to the side.

In exchange, I became aware of the feelings that half of me possessed.

Richly-colored, vivid feelings, so sad it makes me want to cry and so funny it feels ridiculous, are whirling inside my other self.

Yes. This is surely love. A beautiful heart like a fleeting flower has always been completely beyond my reach—

...Of course, this is the love not of myself, but of the *girl who had accepted me within herself*. These overflowing feelings are simply pleasant and lovely.

That's why I felt slightly guilty that the one 'he' saw wasn't her, but me.

The person you should be looking at is her, not me.

But, for some reason, when I look at 'him', I somehow forget the guilt I feel.

...But it's all right.

This love won't end. When I disappear, what will remain are the girl and boy who have a future.

Just by imagining that scene, I—feel so happy I want to cry.

—*The world is beautiful*, someone once said.

The infinitely changing white clouds, the ultramarine-colored sky, old trees that gave off a sense of holiness, new sprouts filled with bursting vivacity... Such forms of natural beauty go without saying. But even the great cities where humans continue struggling to live are filled with a man-made beauty that hides their ugliness.

The world isn't gentle or easy. Rather, the harshness of just surviving is a natural part of the world. Herbivores are eaten by carnivores, carnivores are defeated by human guns, and humans are defeated by something non-human. Even those non-human things—are defeated by mere humans. The victors eventually become the defeated, and are always faced with the despairing cruelty of the world.

There is evil. There is good as well. There is also something grey, in which good and evil are indistinct.

And even so, the world is beautiful.

Life rejoices at being alive. There is neither beauty nor ugliness in that; there is only earnest sweat and effort. As long as people don't arrogantly flaunt the fact they exist—in other words, as long as they continue to choose to live.

The world will surely be eternally beautiful.

While basking in the fleeting and warm light of twilight.

Someone thus prayed.

—*The world is ugly, someone once declared*¹.

Chaos is inevitable in this world. Pure good can't be achieved, and pure evil breaks down. And these two extremes are always incompatible with each other. There is still some evil in a good world. That is how the world is, and it is what continues to create ugly things. Evil sneers at good, and good rages over evil. But, in a world where good and evil oppose each other, there is a group that is far more numerous that always appears.

That is 'grey'. Neither good nor evil. A group that drifts through life haphazardly and merely exists. They don't believe in goodness and are simply proud that they aren't evil. Even though they affirm evil acts, they deny evil intentions. They happily say that 'I am not evil, I am a good person' and pardon all forms of cruelty.

They kill people while sneering. They kill people out of contempt. They kill people as part of a game. They use the excuse that they can't restrain their desires—That's how humans are. That's how the world is.

Yes—this world is extremely ugly. Neither dyed by good nor fallen into evil. Unable to decide on a color, the wills of people continue to waver. As long as such evil intentions and such foul-smelling corpses aren't destroyed.

The world will surely continue to rot eternally.

While wrapped within a curse-like fog in darkness frozen to its core.

Someone thus concluded.

END OF PROLOGUE

1. In the original book, the following text was laid out on page in reverse color from the rest of the pages, with white text on a black background. This is to emphasize the contrast between the two monologues at the end of this chapter and their opposing viewpoints.

Chapter 1

He was in a trance. He was numb. He was in a state of suspension.

The film was cut into disconnected pieces, and the scene changed when he blinked.

He felt intense pain in his chest. A feeling of exhaustion and lethargy gripped his entire body.

Just what on earth happened? Before thinking about such things, the first thing he had to prioritize was—surviving.

What he needed in order to survive was medical treatment—he had to close the wound. But intense pain was attacking him every second, and he couldn't even form a healing spell in his head.

While groaning in anguish, he moved his hand and touched his chest.

Bullets had been shot into his heart—every time the organ pumped blood, the lodged bullets sent fresh pain through him. First, he had to remove the bullets agitating his body.

A healing spell was impossible for him right now. For the time being, he forcefully stimulated his metabolism by forming prana. He had to drag himself up to the point where he could use regular magecraft.

The harmful fog was also a cause for concern. It was accelerating the deterioration of his physical strength.

Though he didn't even have a moment to relax, he felt surprisingly calm. Prana, prana was necessary. He took a deep breath and gathered prana. His lungs might be inflamed, but this wasn't a situation where he could worry about that.

For now, he just gathered up prana. He was beset by head-splitting pain, chipping away even the energy to scream.

More, I need more prana. It's all right, there's no problem. This heart has the blood of a dragon flowing within it. So what if I've been shot by three bullets? Don't worry. As if I'd die from something like this—!

"Guh...!!"

His heart muscles made a screeching noise as they removed the foreign substance within him. Activating his Magic Circuits, he accelerated the prana circulating through him, and gradually it began to repair his body.

Somewhere in his heart, a voice asked in doubt, 'Isn't there something strange about this?'

It was all well and good that Siegfried's heart was strong.

And it was all well and good that he had just barely managed to hold onto his fractured consciousness even while suffering through pain as well.

But—still, even so. This healing ability was too *abnormal*. This situation was similar to when he was cut down by Saber of Red, though of course, the bullet wounds he had received weren't even comparable in terms of destructive power.

However, back then, he had definitely died once even with this heart.

So why was he not dying this time?

—Don't think about it now.

He breathed in and out again. He gathered and accumulated prana. He had to stand up now. The enemy hadn't disappeared like magic, and she hadn't carelessly let her guard down thinking that he was already dead.

Because, even now, she was gazing at him as he repeatedly breathed and vomited out blood—her gaze cold like that of a snake.

Screams of agony gushed out from every direction. Due to the fog that had instantly enveloped Trifas, the town had fallen into complete chaos.

Having donned her armor, Ruler frantically ran after Sieg, who had jumped into the fog without listening to her shouted warning. But his figure had disappeared in a blink of an eye due to the fog obscuring her vision.

She heard the dry sound of something being struck. It was similar to the sound of cannons she had heard in the past, but softer.

“A gunshot...!”

She was certain that Assassin of Black was hiding somewhere within this fog. But right now she was more concerned about Sieg.

The fog that Assassin of Black had unleashed had no effect on Ruler besides obscuring her vision. She didn’t even receive a rank-down in agility, thanks to her ridiculously high Magic Resistance skill.

“Sieg-kun!?”

“Help... me...”

The one who responded to her shout was not Sieg, but a young child. Without hesitation, Ruler decided to head towards the child.

However—Ruler instinctively sensed that Assassin of Black was somewhere nearby. Resolving not to let her guard down, she gripped her flag and searched for the location of that voice.

Searching through her hazy vision, Ruler immediately found the child. The child was pressing her head against a wall, holding her chest in pain. Her face—wasn’t visible.

Ruler hesitated slightly. Assassin’s true name was [Jack the Ripper], the name of a serial killer who was once famous in Great Britain, but—

There was no way Assassin could be such a young girl. But no one knew Jack the Ripper’s face or true identity.

Perhaps... Choosing to discard not even the slightest possibility, Ruler touched the girl’s shoulder.

...Instantly, she was filled with relief. She could tell immediately by touching her.

The girl wasn't a spiritual being like a Servant, but a living human made of flesh and blood.

"Mo... ther..."

"Don't worry, I'll bring you to your mother right away."

Ruler said that and covered the girl with a holy shroud she summoned forth. If she was wrapped in this cloth which protected those who wore it, she would be safe for the time being.

Luckily, the girl didn't seem to be hurt either...

"Eh— —?"

She didn't seem to be hurt.

That was completely impossible. Even if it was somewhat weak, this fog had been harmful enough to make homunculi die or faint within less than ten minutes. Yet why was a normal and weak child like this still alive?

At worst, it should have instantly killed her, and at best, she shouldn't have been able to avoid becoming seriously ill.

"Umm, are you... okay?"

"...Uh-huh. It doesn't hurt anymore."

The girl replied thus to Ruler's question. Ruler felt like something was out of place.

"Where did it hurt?"

The girl silently stuck out her leg. On part of her knee, there was a wound of roughly torn skin. A wound from falling over... was what it obviously wasn't. And of course, she had no wounds from the fog either.

This was—a scar from being cut by something. That's why she had cried out in pain.

A chill went through Ruler's entire body. She was struck by a feeling of 'killing intent'.

Moreover.

It was...

This killing intent wasn't half-hearted. It felt like sticky coal tar, a spike that burned so brightly it turned white, or a mutated murderous virus. It was an astoundingly overwhelming malevolence.

Even worse, this killing intent wasn't directed at Ruler herself—

If I run from here, the child will be killed.

It was directed at the child Ruler was embracing with one arm. Assassin of Black appeared to have overwhelming confidence in his next attack.

"Very well."

Ruler swore that she would protect the girl she was hugging in one arm. No matter what the next attack was, Ruler wouldn't fall as long as she had this flag.

If Ruler had made a miscalculation.

It would be that, in this instant, she concentrated all her senses on Assassin of Black who was going to attack—and viewed the girl she was holding as someone she needed to protect.

The girl opened her mouth—and put her hand inside it, taking out a scalpel that had been stored in her stomach.

In order to kill this unidentified female Servant, Assassin of Black had taken all possible measures. Her own Master, Rikudou Reika, had dealt with the boy who seemed to be this Servant's Master.

But even so, this Servant hadn't fallen into a panic, and instead was trying to find and attack Assassin. Most likely, she possessed the skill [Independent Action], or perhaps—the boy hadn't been her Master in the first place.

Even so, there was no problem. Without hesitation or mercy, Assassin of Black activated her Noble Phantasm.

“Everywhere except here is hell. *We* are flame, rain, and power—”

The surrounding dimension twisted and a *murder* began to take place. The victim is a woman. A ‘woman’ wandering ‘within the fog’ is cut down at ‘night’.

All three of these conditions had been fulfilled. Assassin's attack was **Maria the Ripper: Holy Mother of Dissection**.

An absolute Noble Phantasm that kills virtually all ‘females’.

And now, this Noble Phantasm—a murder—came into existence here.

Jack the Ripper killed at least five prostitutes—perhaps.

Jack the Ripper possessed advanced medical knowledge—perhaps.

Jack the Ripper might have been a man, or might have been a woman.

Even though the events of history remained the same, the existence of Jack the Ripper himself was merely *vague and uncertain*.

No one knew his true identity. No one could figure out his true identity. He might have been a police detective, a private investigator, a poet, a teacher, a doctor, a devilish cutthroat, a psychic, a scientist—or even a god.

There was only one thing that was known for certain about Jack the Ripper.

Jack the Ripper kills women.

The female victim's abdomen split open. The instant the Noble Phantasm is activated, it ends all possible situations.

This was neither an attack by a holy sword nor a series of consecutive attacks by a divine spear—it was the reproduction of a murder.

The victim dies—she is dissected, she has her organs plundered, she loses her blood and, *as a result*, she dies.

First, a 'murder' occurs, followed by 'death', and finally, the 'reason' for it is drastically late in catching up; that's what makes it a truly instantaneous attack. Counterattacking, dodging and resisting are all meaningless.

Assassin of Black was certain of this.

She killed her. She definitely killed this Servant. At the same time, she tried to tear out the Servant's heart.

A Servant's prana was enormous. Even more so within their heart or brain where their spiritual core existed. Assassin of Black would devour her soul and gain even more power.

...If Assassin of Black had made one miscalculation.

It would be that she viewed this woman as just an *ordinary* Servant. True, **Maria the Ripper** was an unequaled Noble Phantasm that delivered instant death in a single blow. All the conditions had been achieved as well—'night', 'within the fog', and a 'woman'.

But even if one brought about a phenomenon that twisted cause and effect, a foundation, something to serve as the raw material for it, was still needed.

In this case, **Maria the Ripper** was, at its essence, a [curse]—the collected grudges of thousands of unborn children. That was the true nature of this fearsome Noble Phantasm.

Accordingly, in order to counter this Noble Phantasm, what was necessary was neither luck nor endurance, but purely an absolute resistance against curses.

And the woman she had targeted—Ruler, Jeanne d’Arc, was a saint who unmistakably had the faith and belief of the world gathered upon her, a Servant with some of the strongest resistance against curses in this world. And what was even more fatal for Assassin of Black...

...was the holy flag she possessed.

Rikudou Reika stared at the revolver whose trigger she had pulled. It was an Italian handgun with an extremely narrow gun barrel, known as a ‘Rhino’. Reika didn’t even know the gun’s name in the first place, though. A Romanian gang that Jack had ‘eaten’ had possessed a heap of firearms, and she had chosen this one because it was the lightest and smallest among them.

How strange, she thought. This thing, which was just big enough to fit into the palm of her hand, could steal a person’s life with just the pull of a single finger.

Wasn’t life something precious and sturdy? At the very least, wasn’t it supposed to be that way? And yet, in the course of just a century, people could die just from getting hit in the brain or heart by tiny lead balls.

Naturally, even magi weren’t an exception to that.

She looked down at the corpse—he looked younger than her. But if he was a magus, he might have some kind of rejuvenation spell. However, it was a fact that he had just tried to save her.

“How pitiful. Truly, how pitiful.”

Reika had raided places that magi used as their residences countless times, and had basically grasped their lifestyle. A home expresses the inner nature of the resident. For example, there were many cases where fastidious people had unexpectedly messy rooms. This was an expression of how, though they could pardon their own messiness, they couldn’t pardon the messiness of others.

The homes of most of the magi had been simple and cold abodes. This most likely signified that they didn't attach importance to their daily lives as human beings.

Reika knew of a similar kind of people. Workaholics... The type of people who simply think of their homes as places to sleep and take baths. Merely a place to rest the bodies of these people who had no hobbies and devoted their entire lives to their work.

On the other hand, each of the magi had ingeniously devised workshops in their basement or in hidden rooms. Looking at those, Reika felt that she understood the nature of magi. It was in those workshops where their passion came out. Their life was in there. A wish similar to a grudge was in there. And at the same time, there was despair in there.

Reika had questioned the magi and learned about their way of life. In order to master the mysteries of magecraft, they passed on their blood and accumulated knowledge from generation to generation, and even while knowing their ultimate goal was unreachable—they devoted their entire lives to it.

To Reika, it seemed like an extremely empty life, but there were certainly such people out there.

However, this boy was still an obstacle to Reika. She felt no emotion beyond pity. Now then, if things had gone well, both this Master and his Servant should have been taken care of by her and Jack.

If she trusted Jack's words, two or three Servants had died on that battlefield a few days ago.

"There's still a long ways to go."

Sighing, Reika was about to leisurely walk away through the fog when—

"Oh my."

She immediately stopped and turned around. Though blood flowed out from his chest and gushed out from his mouth, the boy writhed and struggled on the ground. It appeared he was still alive.

She should have shot him three times at point-blank in the heart. There was no way a human could survive that.

But that was the kind of being a magus was. Though surprised at the fact he was alive, Rikudou Reika did not panic. Ah, is that so? she thought, simply accepting the facts.

In one smooth motion, she switched out the cylinder of the Rhino, threw away the empty shell casings, and reloaded the gun.

As she did so, her movements were frighteningly calm, possessing not a single bit of confusion or hesitation... It could only be called abnormal.

There were humans who could cold-heartedly fire a gun. But there were no humans who could maintain their calm in the face of seeing someone who should have been killed still alive.

Moreover, Reika was not even a professional, and she had never touched a handgun until she came to Romania. Even so, she could calmly pull the trigger. If it was for the sake of her daughter Jack—she could calmly kill anyone.

“I wonder if you’ll die if I shoot you in the head?”

She approached the struggling boy and leveled the gun at him once there was less than a meter of distance between them. *I won’t miss like this*, Reika thought.

The boy was still lying face-down, gripping his chest in pain. His breathing was rough and wild, and it seemed he hadn’t even noticed that Reika was pointing her gun at him yet.

Please properly die this time.

With that wish in mind, Reika fired the gun.

The strength from her finger went from the trigger to the firing hammer, the firing hammer hit the detonator, the gunpowder exploded, and the bullet was shot with overwhelming power. It had more than enough energy to destroy a person’s skull.

That boy was completely powerless in the face of the bullet flying swiftly towards him.

No... he should have been powerless.

“Straße \ gehen.”

Just when she thought she saw a pale light suddenly shine, the boy swung out his hand as if to protect his head. There was the high-pitched sound of something popping.

“...Oh my.”

The bullet that should have pierced through the crown of his head had disappeared somewhere. To be precise, it hadn’t disappeared, but been smashed to pieces.

Without hesitation, Reika pulled the trigger once more—and the boy repeated the same words as before, with the bullet vanishing at the same time as he struck it with his palm.

“This is... no good, huh?”

The boy’s breathing was starting to gradually settle down. He was still kneeling on the ground as if prostrating himself, but he raised his body up with his left arm and took a firm step with his right foot. He seemed to be receiving damage due to being within the fog, but—it didn’t seem to be any significant obstacle to him.

“So you’re Assassin of Black’s Master?”

The boy asked that in a low voice.

Now then, what to do—while pondering her option, Reika retreated a step back.

Though only slightly, blood flowed out from the nape of Ruler’s neck. The vacant-eyed girl had stabbed her with a scalpel. There was little strength in the attack, and the scalpel itself didn’t have much prana loaded within it either. But the girl’s arm had changed to the color of black, to the point that it was painful to look at.

Spiritual possession—possession by a low-level spirit was a common phenomenon. Dispersing the spirit wasn’t very difficult either. Normally, Ruler would have been able to easily deal with her attack, even if it was a surprise attack.

But on top of embracing the aforementioned girl in her arm, Ruler had concentrated all her senses on the attacking Assassin of Black.

Her thoughts halted for a slight instant at this extremely unexpected attack. That temporary halt in her thoughts was precisely what Assassin of Black had aimed for—

Here it comes...!

Here I go...!

Assassin of Black—activated her Noble Phantasm, **Maria the Ripper: Holy Mother of Dissection**.

Ruler—activated her Noble Phantasm, **Luminosité Eternelle: God is Here With Me**.

All of Jack the Ripper's preparations were complete. She had prepared a situation where she could use her Noble Phantasm to maximum effect, and had perfectly made a surprise attack by using a decoy.

Therefore, Assassin was one step faster.

Ruler's Noble Phantasm was slightly late in activating.

But, even so, that grudge did not reach Ruler.

The rushing black grudge tried to possess Ruler, and at the same time tried to split open her abdomen—but Ruler's Noble Phantasm activated immediately before it could.

"Kuh...!!"

An intense shock ran through the holy flag. As expected, it couldn't absorb all of the curse and the damage, and numbness ran through her entire body. Different from Berserker of Red's attack, which was a simple torrent of energy, this was a curse-type Noble Phantasm that followed some form of rules.

It was something that could easily kill and dissolve a normal Servant.

Ruler cried out in anguish and spat out black-dyed blood. But she didn't bend even a single knee, and somehow managed to hold her ground there.

"Wha— — —!?"

The one who shouted in astonishment was Assassin of Black, who had just landed on the ground. She had definitely activated her certain-death Noble Phantasm under perfect conditions. And yet it hadn't even dealt a fatal wound.

"So you're... a user of evil spirits, Assassin of Black."

Ruler pinned down the struggling young girl with one hand, and after she touched her forehead, the girl fainted. Ruler then sprinkled holy water from her pocket over her and quickly exorcised the spirit within her. Her blackened arm soon returned to normal—and her atrocious appearance changed to that of a gentle young girl.

"Why... aren't you dead?"

Assassin's voice was somehow strange. It was rough and mixed together with odd noise, as if several people were saying the same words at the same time.

Most shocking of all was that she looked just like a very young girl. For a young girl to be a Servant was unusual enough, but for her to be the serial killer Jack the Ripper who once terrorized Greater Britain was far beyond Ruler's expectations.

Without revealing the surprise she felt within, Ruler replied to Assassin's question.

"Unfortunately, I possess something with a resistance against curses."

"...That flag, huh?"

Assassin of Black nodded in understanding. That flag had absorbed Assassin of Black's attack like a lightning rod. Her preparations hadn't been meaningless; the evil spirit she had put into the child that she had kidnapped within the town had borne fruit, making Ruler's Noble Phantasm slightly delayed in its activation.

As a result, the curse had definitely adversely affected the Servant before her eyes—but she was still alive.

"...Onee-san, is your class Lancer? ...No. The number of Servants wouldn't match in that case. Saber, then?"

"No, neither. I am Ruler, the mediator of the Great Holy Grail War."

Assassin of Black's eyes widened.

"Heeh. Ruler... so there was such a class as well. I didn't know," Assassin murmured.

Ruler glanced at the girl that had fainted. If she had remained possessed by that evil spirit, even her soul would have been contaminated and she would have turned into the living dead.

Ruler thrust her holy flag forward. As if pressured by her gallantness, Assassin took a step back.

"Assassin. The Holy Grail War should consist of only seven Masters and Servants competing over the Holy Grail. Your behavior in dragging an innocent child into this is the worst possible offence. I won't let you get away."

"...Hmm. Is that so?"

Ruler's words seemed to touch upon something within Assassin of Black. She looked at the sleeping girl, and then suddenly threw a scalpel at her.

Ruler repelled it with her flag—but she felt something was off. There was no meaning in that attack. Ruler could only think that it was an outburst of anger. No, if it wasn't an outburst of anger, then—

"Assassin... it couldn't be..."

"Children are *a dime a dozen*. If you still want to protect her... then good luck with that."

Holding eight scalpels between her fingers—Assassin smiled faintly.

From the rooftop of Trifas City Hall, Archer of Red watched the disastrous scene below with a dumbfounded expression.

"This is—"

Fog covered Trifas. Even if it was a small town, it was insane for the entire town to be covered by fog. All the traffic on the streets and sidewalks always died out immediately once it turned nighttime these

days, but since the sun had only just set, many people who were in the midst of returning home should have been engulfed within the fog.

In reality, screams were rising from all over the town. At first people were confused, then they shrieked, and after screaming, they begged for help with hoarse voices.

...There was nothing she could do.

...And most of all, she didn't intend to do anything about it either.

"You were all unlucky."

Archer of Red coldly muttered that. The inhabitants here should have already noticed the abnormalities occurring in this town. They were the ones who decided to go walking at night in this situation.

Assassin of Black was certainly involved with the specific manner of their deaths, but the responsibility of their death lay with themselves, and most of all—they were just fatally unlucky.

...It was a common occurrence. The weak are devoured by the strong due to bad luck, and even the strong were brought to an end by 'something else'. Therefore, Archer of Red had no intention of saving them.

Her vision was completely blocked by the fog, but if she used her sense of hearing and ability to sense the presence of other Servants, she could roughly grasp the location of each Servant. As expected, Assassin of Black was the only one whose presence was vague and hard to grasp, but Ruler was easy to detect. She was a vortex of light that shined purely and honestly no matter how dark the night was.

Archer of Red could tell that Rider and Archer of Black were searching for her, but they didn't seem to be able to detect her presence yet. Most likely, Ruler was the only one who could sense her.

But Ruler was sprinting through the fog right now. She was fighting Assassin of Black. In other words, she didn't have the time to concentrate on Archer of Red.

"Even so... to think that she's unable to take down Assassin."

Archer of Red tilted her head in puzzlement. Assassin, just as the name indicated, was the class of 'assassination'. To them, facing the enemy head-on was the height of foolishness.

For her not to be able to take down Assassin one-on-one, it meant that either Ruler was a very weak and puny Servant, or that this fog gave Assassin a tremendous advantage—

Either way, the time had come for Archer of Red to make a decision on how to act.

Should she throw herself into the fog, or continue waiting and watching like this?

Watching from the sidelines was a valid tactic, but there was one problem... Since earlier, Rider of Black had been actively doing reconnaissance from the sky. Archer was confident that the swiftness of her feet wouldn't lose to even Rider of Red, but even so, she wanted to at least avoid being pursued by a hippogriff.

A flying Phantasmal Beast born from a griffin and a horse. No matter how much she sprinted across the earth, that thing could easily catch up with her from the sky.

If there was any merit in boldly jumping into the fog, it was that a chance to kill Ruler might appear. Archer of Red had decided to acknowledge Shirou Kotomine as her Master. She didn't know if his 'method' was truly right. But there was definitely truth in his words.

She wanted to believe it. Archer of Red had a wish that she prioritized above everything else.

The salvation of all young children in the world. A world where they are all loved—where they are all happy, without a single exception. The malice in the world said that such a thing was impossible. Everyone devours each other; that was how the world worked. Even Archer of Red understood that.

Even so. Even so, she couldn't help but wish for it... After all, Atalanta herself was abandoned on a mountain immediately after she was born.

"A woman is unnecessary."

Her father had said that and abandoned her on a mountain. The moon goddess Artemis had seen this and thought it pitiful, so she decided to send a female bear to raise her.

Protected by the bear, Atalanta grew up on the mountain.

Many other babies besides her were abandoned on that mountain. Most of those infants died due to either being devoured by beasts or starving to death. Even if they survived by chance, their thought processes were exactly the same as a *beast's*. Separated from the world, they lived meaningless lives and died meaningless deaths.

Thanks to being raised by the female bear, Atalanta's life was rescued, and eventually she was found by a hunter.

...She remembered.

She remembered quite well the moment when she was abandoned. As an infant, she had noisily flapped her hands and desperately sought her father and mother—but her mother wasn't there, and her father had abandoned her.

She remembered wanting to be saved. She remembered wanted for someone to grasp her hand.

She remembered that her wish wasn't granted, and how she had drowned in a sea of fear—and how she had held out her hands while sobbing.

The wound in her heart from being abandoned never healed.

Even after growing up beautifully and becoming a famous archer—she continued to maintain her solitude.

She had friends. She had comrades with whom she rode the *Argo* alongside and went through many adventures. But she never found a human she could love to the point of risking her life and didn't think to have a child either.

She felt that way even more after the competition and struggle over her during the Calydonian Hunt.

But—most likely because of her fame that arose from her adventures, Atalanta's beauty became known by many people, and in the end reached the ears of her father as well.

"Anyone is fine. Take a husband and bear a child."

To her father, his reunion with Atalanta was a joyous event. But that was only because she had grown up to be beautiful and could be used as marriage material.

...Ultimately, the father never loved his daughter, from beginning to end.

After that, she tried to run away from the marriage once she learned the conditions for it, but she was caught in a scheme and ended up marrying Hippomenes.

—She just wanted to be loved.

She wanted to know true love with no strings attached to carnal desire, honor or lust for power.

It would have been better if she could believe that there was no such thing as love. If she could think that this world was hell, that this was a damned world where parents devour their children and children devour their parents—how much better would have been?

But that was incorrect.

There were parents who love their children in the world. It was a free, wonderful love. There were parents who gave up their lives for the sake of their children. There were parents who worked hard their entire lives for the sake of their children and still smiled.

On the other hand, there were parents who oppressed their children. There were parents who treated the children they had given life to like trash.

That's wrong, Atalanta thought.

That must be corrected, Atalanta thought.

Even though she understood it was a natural part of the world's cruelty, she still wished for it to be changed.

The reason she was participating in the Holy Grail War was because she had the faint hope that the Holy Grail would be able to grant her wish.

It was a wish that Assassin of Red had called "impossible".

Archer herself also understood that. She thought that it might be a wish that surpassed the ability of the Holy Grail.

But Shirou Kotomine had showed her a way. That boy had showed her hope. A method to save the world, to save all children using the Holy Grail.

In that case, she would eliminate even Ruler if she became an obstruction.

She was fully aware of the danger in jumping into the fog. She was fully aware, but—

"If it's for the sake of those children, I have no regrets."

Archer of Red leaped from the rooftop of city hall and jumped into the fog.

He was wracked by intense pain every time he breathed. An ugly scar was spread across his blood-stained chest, a mark from the shots that had hit him. Three bullets had gouged through his chest muscles and reached his heart. If they had been shot at his forehead, he would have certainly died.

But that didn't mean that he had escaped from death's door—in fact, there was a gun pointed at Sieg right now.

It would be over for him if he was shot in the head. And the mother in front of him was replacing the gun's bullets with a single smooth hand motion. Her movements were extremely calm, showing no signs of panic. *She's used to killing...* Sieg surmised.

In only a few seconds, this woman was going to shoot him in the head.

I won't let her. Activate Magic Circuits—concentrate prana in palm—acquire information on lodged bullets—leave thinking about whether or not it's possible to swing my arm at the same velocity as the bullet and crush it in the instant they touch for later—chant the spell—!

"Ooooooooooh!"

The gun fired.

Two bullets were fired, and he repelled each one.

His right arm grated... Abnormalities had definitely formed within the bones. Enduring it, he gritted his teeth and glared.

The mother who sought help. The mother who laughed along with her daughter. Who are you?

A Master, or perhaps someone else? Either way, she wasn't an innocent person who could be left alone. But, in complete opposite to Sieg's determination to fight, the woman didn't pull the trigger any further, and instead suddenly dropped her coat and began running away.

"Wa... Wait!"

Caught by surprise by her attempt to escape, Sieg frantically chased after her. But then a terrible clanging sound cut in between them. Immediately after, two figures leapt out before him.

One was Ruler, and the other was a slender young girl wearing a leather bondage suit. Ruler was running fiercely enough to crush the pavement beneath her and held a human girl in one arm. The other girl climbed up and clung to the wall of a building with clearly inhuman speed.

"Sieg-kun!?"

"Ah...!"

The girl looked at Sieg's face and slightly widened her eyes, leaking out a gasp of surprise.

Ruler immediately swung her flag—and the high-pitched clang of steel rang out. A crushed scalpel was knocked to the ground.

It appeared the girl had thrown a scalpel at Sieg and Ruler had knocked it away.

“...You aren’t dead. What a shock.”

“Assassin... you seem to have a score to settle with him, but I’m your opponent right now.”

Apparently, that girl was Assassin of Black—in other words, Jack the Ripper.

“What a bad joke.”

In response to Sieg’s murmur, Ruler sighed in agreement. She still held the unconscious little girl in her arms.

“She’s—the daughter of that mother, if I remember right.”

“Yes. More importantly, Sieg-kun, did you find her mother?”

Ruler questioned him while holding her flag ready and cautiously watching Assassin. Assassin was still clinging to the wall, unmoving as she held two scalpels ready. *Like a spider*, Sieg thought.

“...It appears the mother is Assassin’s Master.”

“Eh? How do you know?”

Sieg silently placed a hand on his chest to display the blood clinging to him.

“She shot me.”

“I see, she shot you... A-A-A-Are you all right, Sieg-kun!?”

In actual fact, bullets had been shot into his heart, so he was far from all right—but he currently felt no significant pain or hindrance to his movements.

“I’m fine. More importantly, Ruler. I’ll chase after the Master, in order to bring down Assassin of Black here as well.”

“...No. It might be better if you let her go.”

As she said that, Ruler instantly swung her flag—and before Sieg could ask why, a jarring metallic sound rang through the area. And then, the shards of a broken scalpel were scattered on the ground near Sieg.

“I won’t let you lay a hand on *Mother*.”

There was clear killing intent within Assassin's otherwise exceptionally impassive expression. *I see.* Sieg immediately understood. If he moved away from Ruler, Assassin would definitely attack him.

Naturally, Ruler would act to defend him, but Assassin rivaled proper Heroic Spirits like the Knight classes or the Rider class when it came to swiftness. In the worst case, if she managed to circumvent Ruler, Assassin would easily kill Sieg.

"Sorry. It seems I've become a burden."

"It's fine... It's all right, Sieg-kun. There's no need for you to transform. If we wait just a little longer, reinforcements will arrive."

Reinforcements.

...*I see.* Sieg decided to maintain a wait-and-see stance. Sieg had resolved to transform into Saber should it come to a fight earlier, but he decided to call it off. If he transformed, Ruler's good will would be brought to naught. Preventing that was very important to Sieg.

Sieg weaved prana and then took out the slender sword from the scabbard that now hung from his waist. It was the sword that Rider of Black had given him before.

It was the weapon of a Servant, a spiritual being, so normally, only Rider could materialize it by weaving it out of prana.

But, most likely because it had been loaned to him by Rider's own will and Sieg himself had become something exceedingly close to a Servant, he was able to materialize it in the physical world using the same trick he used to activate his Magic Circuits.

"We wouldn't do that if we were you, you know?"

Giving a small smile, Assassin of Black whistled. The sound of pitter-pattering footsteps resounded around them—and then Ruler's face turned pale.

"Assassin, you wouldn't...!"

Hearing Ruler's tense voice, Sieg also became on guard and observed their surroundings. From within the fog, the faint forms of countless children holding scalpels in their hands appeared. Some of them were slightly familiar—among them, there were also children who he had

seen playing earlier during the day.

They wore open-mouthed and empty expressions, their entire bodies convulsing in spasms, and their arms holding the scalpels were turning black... Assassin of Black was an aggregation of vengeful spirits. Those spirits appeared to have possessed these children. The separated vengeful spirits were weak enough on their own that a saint like Ruler could easily dissipate them by reciting holy scripture, but Assassin wasn't using them as soldiers, but rather as mobile hostages. Since Ruler was a saint, she had to protect the children... or so Assassin had judged.

"Hmm, then Ruler, and also the, umm... Master over there? *Try protecting every single one of them.*"

"Sieg-kun!"

No need to even ask, Sieg thought as he moved. He repelled the thrown scalpels and at the same time knocked down the children who rushed at him. The children weren't attacking by their own will, but rather that of the vengeful spirits that possessed them. They were unconscious from the start, so making them faint was useless, and he could only buy time by knocking them down.

But as he desperately pinned down each child, Assassin's scalpels came flying. Moreover, they were aimed mercilessly and incessantly at the children.

"Kuh...!"

A thrown scalpel stabbed into Sieg's left arm. Defending against scalpels without knowing when they would come flying while also dealing with the attacking children was, as expected, beyond Sieg's capabilities.

Though Ruler was able to dispose of the scalpels, she was forced to take a step back for every one she took forward, preventing her from getting near Assassin. If Ruler carelessly approached, Assassin would easily rain scalpels down on the children.

For an instant, Ruler thought about using a Command Spell, but the female Master who had run away was a problem. Based on Assassin's behavior, her relationship with her Master was closer to that of a mother and daughter rather than Master and Servant, and as such they probably wouldn't be stingy about using a Command Spell depending on the situation. It was likely that any order that Ruler gave for Assassin to

commit suicide or hinder her would be immediately canceled out by her Master's Command Spells.

The situation was in a complete stalemate, but Sieg's exhaustion was steadily increasing. It was a battle of time. Either Rider would plunge into the fog, find them and join the battle first, or Assassin would kill Sieg before then.

Even if defeating Ruler was impossible, Assassin determined that killing Sieg would be easy. A surprise attack was already impossible in this situation, but even so, she could easily strike at his openings.

Assassin threw down a rain of scalpels and began driving Ruler and Sieg apart, though the pivot of her plan merely required that she drive Sieg far enough away that Ruler couldn't reach him in a single jump.

She controlled the children with her vengeful spirits and gradually separated Ruler and Sieg. Even as she threw her scalpels, Assassin moved to a location from which she could kill Sieg with a single strike.

Ruler purified the vengeful spirits possessing the children one by one.

But the children were many, and most of all, their value as hostages remained even with the vengeful spirits dissipated. It made protecting them easier, but that was all.

In the midst of that, Ruler realized.

"Sieg-kun! Get back over here!"

Hearing Ruler's shout, Sieg also finally noticed it. He and Ruler had become completely separated by the attacking children between them.

Even if Ruler tried to protect Sieg from Assassin's attack, with over a dozen children acting as a wall and blocking her way, she would be unable to protect Sieg for the span of an instant.

"Too slow — — — —!"

Assassin jumped off the wall and charged at Sieg. She held a butcher's knife in each hand, and moved to cleave off Sieg's head with them.

Her absolute confidence in victory.

The despairing sound of his defeat.

But there was something even swifter than Sieg's decision to transform or Assassin's motion to cut off Sieg's head.

An arrow shot by the god-tier bowman—Archer of Black—tore through the fog enwrapping the town like a ferocious shark.

It was too late by the time Assassin noticed it. The arrow, filled with prana, exploded like a cannon shot. It was strong enough for the aftershock to blow away Sieg too and send him tumbling across the ground. Assassin, who was directly hit by it, had part of her body *blown off*.

“Ugh, guuuuuuh...!!”

Howling in anguish, Assassin still managed to jump away. She leapt from building to building and tried to escape somewhere safe.

“—You're not getting away!”

Ruler dashed towards her with the speed of a shooting star.

Because Assassin was concentrating on running away, the movements of the possessed children became dull, and having noticed that, Ruler dashed across the surface of a building's wall and brandished her holy flag at Assassin of Black.

Assassin tried to directly block the attack with the butcher's knives in her hands, but the holy flag didn't have a sharp edge like a blade. It was a weapon that blocked attacks and knocked down the enemy with its steel pole.

Furthermore, Jeanne d'Arc's flag was a holy treasure that had always accompanied her on the battlefield and was treated as a symbol even now.

Jack the Ripper's knives were symbols of fear—but still, there was no way they could win against a holy flag that had won great fame on the battlefield.

Assassin of Black fell. With a strike strong enough to make a crater in stone pavement, she was rendered pretty much incapable of any further fighting.

The sorrow of the Assassin class was that she didn't have the endurance to trade direct blows with those of the three Knight classes or the Ruler class.

"Guh... uu, uuu, uuuuuuugh...!"

Even so, Assassin of Black continued moving and tried to escape. Ruler glanced at Sieg. The possessed children were all falling to the ground as if their souls had come out.

Ruler guessed that Assassin of Black's injuries were probably the cause. There was no error in her conclusion. Assassin of Black had weakened to the point that she had to call back and gather together the vengeful spirits possessing the children.

Even the fog created by her Noble Phantasm was gradually clearing away.

"Mo... ther... Mother, Mother...!"

While fallen to her hands and knees and trying to run away using only her arms, Assassin of Black called for her mother. Ruler couldn't help but feel pity for her.

If someone asked whether Assassin was a perpetrator or victim, she was unmistakably a perpetrator. But most likely, her origins had begun from being a victim.

Looking at her form and hearing her voice, Ruler came to such a conclusion.

And—even so, she was evil. If left alone, the phenomenon known as Jack the Ripper would probably swell and grow until it could no longer be crammed into the frame of a Servant.

She was a unique, abnormal monster that existed outside conventional boundaries.

Ruler cut in front of the crawling Assassin of Black and placed a hand on her face in order to sublimate her with a Baptism Rite.

"The Lord forgives all injustice and forgives all calamities. And he frees your life from the grave, feeling love and compassion—"

Perhaps sensing something, Assassin's ice-blue eyes widened in fear.

"No..."

Without responding to Assassin's words, Ruler commenced chanting.

"No... no... no, no, no...! Stop it! Stop, stop, stop! *Mother...! Save me, Mother...!*"

Ruler gritted her teeth and continued the chant, but suddenly sensed a massive outpouring of prana.

"This is—a Command Spell!?"

"Motheer¹!"

Instantly, Assassin of Black disappeared. The Master had mostly likely sensed that her Servant was in danger and used a Command Spell. Just as Ruler thought, she appeared to be watching Assassin's condition from somewhere. Her lack of effort to hide their murders might have disqualified her as a magus, but it seemed she firmly understood the system under which the Holy Grail War functioned.

Ruler faintly sensed traces of Assassin of Black's presence. She was mostly likely still somewhere in this town. Now that the fog had cleared away, searching for her would be easy. They couldn't allow her to slip away here.

"Let's chase after her, Sieg-kun!"

Sieg nodded and began running after Ruler's wake.

Rikudou Reika used the Command Spell because the fog had cleared away. The fog dissipating meant that Jack's power had considerably weakened. It was easy for Reika to imagine that she had fallen into a dangerous situation.

1. Unlike how she usually says it, Assassin says "Mother" without overlapping it with "Master".

“Mo... ther...”

As Assassin of Black cowered in pain, Reika quickly lifted her up. Though she was a Servant, her weight was the same as that of a young girl. Assassin was extremely light, so much that it made Reika wonder if she was completely empty inside.

“Sorry...”

“Don’t talk. Now, go to sleep.”

Reika began walking hurriedly as she spoke. They had to withdraw from here. Luckily, their hideout was nearby.

“*Mother*... what should we do next...?”

“Let’s think about it after you’ve healed your injuries. For now, you should rest.”

While saying that, Reika kept thinking. They wanted to obtain the Holy Grail, and those people they had fought were an obstacle to that, but eliminating them would be even more difficulty after this. Perhaps the two of them should give thought to a drawn-out war and withdraw from Trifas.

Fortunately, there would be no trouble obtaining information as long as there were magi around. No matter where in the world the Holy Grail was, they should definitely be able to track it.

“...Hey, hey, *Mother*. I want to hear, the piano, again...”

Hearing that childish request suddenly come from Jack’s mouth, Reika giggled. Though she was in pain, Jack whined charmingly while smiling.

“All right, I will.”

Prioritizing Jack’s words was more important than thinking of a battle plan to Reika right now.

Seeing Jack smile despite the pain made Reika feel relieved. The fog had literally vanished like mist. If they didn’t hurry, they might be found again—

Reika was hurrying down a narrow street only wide enough for a single car to pass through. There were people collapsed on the ground here and there, but she ignored every single one of them. Her heart felt nothing for them, merely discarding them with the thought ‘They were unlucky’. Right now, giving her daughter in her arms the chance to rest was prioritized over everything else for her.

One of the street lamps, which had just come back on, illuminated the glass window of a shop she happened to be passing by.

By the chance, the reflection of the light showed *that* to Reika. A human form, wearing strange clothes that clearly looked like those of someone from an entirely different era. And that person had nocked an arrow on a bow and was aiming it in her direction—it was unmistakably an enemy, and the target of the arrow was Reika and Jack in her arms.

She was forced to choose. At this rate, that arrow would definitely pierce through both her and Jack. She didn’t know about Jack, but she at least would experience near instant death. Relying on luck was useless here.

She couldn’t escape, and fighting would be difficult as well. There was no way the enemy would show mercy.

In other words, she had no means of stopping it. Therefore, *there was no meaning in what she was about to do now*

“...Yeah, it can’t be helped.”

There truly was no meaning in doing it. *But I have to do it*, thought Rikudou Reika.

Any further thought ended at exactly that instant for her.

Reika suddenly spun around and released Jack from her arms. Naturally, Jack fell on her back onto the stone pavement.

Having suddenly been thrown away, Jack looked at Reika with a dumbfounded expression—and froze.

“Mo, ther...?”

She felt sharp pain for an instant, but even so, Reika managed to understand instinctively.

I can’t be saved.

—From the beginning, it was a battle with slim chances of victory. Since the Assassin class itself only showed its true worth in a battle royal, Jack was unable to fight fair and square no matter how much she struggled.

Killing the Masters was also difficult considering how they were holed up in the fortress. Furthermore, her Master Reika wasn't a magus and couldn't supply prana, the source of a Servant's power.

That's why, from the start, they were at an overwhelming disadvantage. If Reika knew who was managing this whole affair, she would have seriously lodged a complaint against them.

But Reika hadn't minded at all.

She didn't mind killing people. She had killed both the sinful and the innocent alike, but she still didn't worry herself over it—she felt some pity for the victims, but that was all.

There were only two important points for her.

Jack the Ripper had saved Rikudou Reika. She had granted Reika's wish to live.

And, though it was only for a short time, she had enjoyed the days she spent with Jack more than anything else in her entire life.

No matter how bloody, no matter how cruel Jack was—

Rikudou Reika had enjoyed being with her from the bottom of her heart.

—*Mother.*

A little girl had called her that with an innocent voice. No matter what her true identity was, Reika didn't care. Just that alone made her happy. Just that alone made those days together so wonderful.

The happy dream ended.

She had a mountain of regrets—but there was no use regretting.

It was a happy dream.

While her thoughts were still clear, Reika murmured that in her mind. As she fell to the ground face-up, Jack frantically approached her.

"Mother...!!"

Reika put a hand on Jack's cheek—she had enough time and strength left to do that at least. She smiled—she somehow managed to do that much. As for final words—that was pointless. There was something more important she needed to say right now.

She had two things to say.

"I order you with two Command Spells. [Even if I'm not here anymore], [you'll be fine]... Jack."

It was useless to keep these Command Spells at this point.

She used up her remaining two and tried to boost Jack's chances of survival even a little. As always, she didn't understand magecraft very well.

She didn't understand it, so she used it as a stand-in for a good luck charm. Like how a mother reassures her fearful daughter, Reika used her remaining Command Spells.

"No, don't go, don't go, Mother! No, no, no...!"

You're a smart daughter, thought Reika.

She was losing consciousness and drifting away from the world—she closed her eyes. Her hearing was faltering, and she couldn't even squeeze back the hand that held hers.

She could no longer feel or even think anything.

At that moment, Rikudou Reika merely wore an expression that somehow seemed to fit the situation... a smile.

Archer of Red shot down Assassin of Black's Master. Even if she had left them alone, it wouldn't have been a problem. Rather, it would have been better for Archer's side if Assassin and her Master fostered further chaos that way. The only ones bothered by the fact that they were murderers and deviating from the rules of the Great Holy Grail War were magi. It had nothing to do with Archer of Red.

But—Assassin of Black had involved children.

At that instant, Assassin and her Master became enemies to Archer of Red. The Master was especially unforgivable. Assassin was a child, but her Master was an adult—and she had allowed her Servant to involve children.

Archer had nocked an arrow and intended to end both Assassin and her Master together. But surprisingly, Assassin's Master, perhaps because she was trying to protect the Servant in her arms, had turned in Archer's direction.

Coincidentally, their gazes met.

She did not have the appearance of a crafty magus, but rather wore modern clothing—she was clearly an ordinary woman.

The woman had worn a fleeting look of sorrow, and then, without resisting at all, simply waited for the arrow to be shot. No, that wasn't right. It appeared the woman was trying to protect Assassin.

—Even though it was a meaningless act.

Archer of Red didn't waver. If her target was letting herself be shot, Archer wouldn't pass the opportunity up. Neutrally, emptying herself of all sentiment, she shot the arrow.

The shot was more than enough to kill a single person. The arrow pierced the Master's chest, and Archer of Red could sense from the feedback that it had killed Assassin's Master.

"Mother...! Mother, Mother, Mother...!"

Assassin's Master placed her hand on the cheek of the young girl that

was desperately calling out to her, and murmured something to her before finally dying.

A feeling similar to guilt gouged Archer's chest, but it didn't move her heart. Even if she was a child, Assassin was a Servant. Servants were beings summoned in order to win the Holy Grail War.

Even if she took the form of a child, that was simply the form of her heyday in life.

...Though it was irregular, there were such cases among Heroic Spirits.

Assassin of Black merely stared at the corpse of her Master in a daze. She would disappear eventually at this rate even if Archer let her go, but even if it was a one-in-a-million chance, another Master might appear to make a contract with her.

I'll get rid of her here and now, Archer decided, nocking another arrow and immediately shooting it. Assassin didn't move an inch from her kneeling position beside the corpse. Perhaps she didn't even understand that an arrow had been shot at her.

It's better that way, thought Archer. It would be better if she just let it all go like this. All of Assassin's regrets, hopes and despair would be irrelevant if she disappeared.

Assassin merely convulsed for an instant when the arrow pierced her heart, not even letting out a scream.

Puzzled, Archer of Red approached her. The arrow definitely should have destroyed Assassin's spiritual core. But she didn't display any response to it.

There was no sign of pain, or of her body fading away and vanishing. It was an abnormal sight. Assassin was merely looking up at the sky. Her blank face made it clear that she was no longer capable of fighting.

And yet, Archer of Red felt a chill go down her back and started to feel fear towards something she couldn't place.

Heroic Spirits were those who had become figures of bravery by conquering fear in all forms. Naturally, as a Heroic Spirit herself, Atalanta understood that well.

She didn't fear the darkness of the forest deep in the night. She hadn't

feared the giant boar that a god had released on the earth.

She could even laugh and overcome battlefields where a single instant's decision could lead to death. That shouldn't have changed in the Great Holy Grail War either.

There was no room for her to feel fear in this situation. She had shot down the enemy, and even if she hadn't, Assassin was on the verge of death. This was enemy territory, but she was confident that she could make her escape on her swift feet. Even if everything proceeded in the worst possible way and she perished on this battlefield, she would have regrets, but she would accept it.

That was the karma of battle. Any Heroic Spirit had at least that much resolve.

But...

Archer of Red took a step back. No, the *thing* that conflicted her right now was something decisively different from that kind of fear.

It was the feeling that, just by remaining here, *something would end*.

What was there to fear? Assassin of Black no longer had any means of counterattack.

Just what kind of threat could a Servant, who's Master was dead and who couldn't use her Noble Phantasms, pose?

There was no threat. There shouldn't have been, and yet—

Assassin of Black's head spun around her neck like that of a doll's, and turned to face Archer of Red. Archer couldn't help but think that her blank eyes were beautiful like blue crystals.

Assassin of Black opened her mouth.

"Why?"

After Assassin spoke that single word, a stream of black mud-like mass spewed out from her mouth.

Archer of Red frantically jumped away, but her reaction was fatally too slow.

“This is...!?”

Summoned as Assassin, Jack the Ripper was an amalgamation of vengeful spirits. The unborn children who had been abandoned in the Whitechapel district had merely temporarily materialized by taking the form of a young girl.

Archer of Red’s arrow just now had released all of them from the focal point known as [Jack the Ripper].

Looking like a thick fog, the vengeful spirits attacked the nearest living being, Archer—and completely engulfed her.

—In that instant, Archer of Red saw hell.

Question: What is hell?

Answer: Eternally continuing torture.

Answer: Eternally repeated slaughter.

Answer: Eternally unending despair.

Indeed, each and every one of these can be called hell.

However, there are actually a great variety of hells in this world.

The city of fog, London, the Whitechapel district—to certain people, that place was definitely hell. Just living was difficult, and it was impossible to have a life you could take pride in.

How could there be pride in a world where nine-year-old girls sold their bodies on the street? The stench of the tanning factories and meat processing plants always filled the air, and rats and cockroaches rejoiced in this society. There was no such thing as the ‘strong’ there; everyone who lived there were miserable weaklings, pitiful victims and cruel assailants.

Yes, it was hell.

Hell, this is truly hell. Children, there are children, so many children.

Their eyes are dead. They understand that there is no love in this world. No, that's wrong, there is love. There definitely is. And yet, I can't call out to them. I want to help, I want to save you all, and yet my body won't move.

All the children turned their eyes towards her.

I'll save you! I'll save you! I was abandoned just like you all in the past. I was saved from that fate! The joy of that, the happiness of that, I'll bestow it to you all—

She had lost the ability to speak, but even so, Archer of Red tried to appeal to them in her heart. The children merely approached her silently.

There was no joy, sorrow or hatred in them. Their cold and inhuman eyes were similar to those of sharks.

Archer of Red unconsciously tried to step back in chilling revulsion, but one of the children grabbed her arm.

The children opened all their mouths at once.

“Join us.”

Smoothly, the child entered inside her skin. Another one grabbed her legs—and penetrated her blood vessels. Others penetrated her nerves, bones, organs, muscles, brain...

Archer of Red screamed.

Her heart was tormented not by fear, but by the despair of the children and herself—



Sieg and Ruler, who had been chasing after Archer of Black, were also engulfed in *it*.

A black fog-like something had surged toward them while they were running through the streets, and engulfed them without giving them any time to run away. A mud-like substance coiled around their entire bodies, and all their senses were cut off, like when you're about to fall asleep.

When he regained his senses, Sieg was standing in a strange place.

"This is..."

He was in an extremely cold city covered in fog. A heavy and awful stench pervaded the area. The stench of meat, the stench of entrails, the stench of vomit and human excrement...

This isn't Trifas, Sieg judged based on his surroundings. The building architecture was completely different, and there were people on the streets. Though the fog smelled slightly disgusting, it wasn't painful.

He noticed that all of senses were dull and muted for some reason, and that everyone passing by him on the street was ignoring him.

He began walking. He limped, unable to feel his feet stepping on the ground, as if he were stepping on a plastic bag.

This is an illusion, or a nightmare—Sieg thus concluded.

The problem was, whose dream was this? It wasn't Sieg's; this scenery was completely unknown to him. It wasn't Ruler's either. He already knew her true name. No matter how he thought about it, this place didn't match the era she was from.

A cold wind blew by, seeming to permeate his very flesh and bones, and a crumpled newspaper floated down in front of Sieg's feet.

He read the text on it—and understood everything.

From Hell—Jack the Ripper

This appears to be Jack the Ripper's... that is, Assassin of Black's dream. But where is Assassin herself? She... no, he? Which was it? Strange, there's no way I could have forgotten that...

“Damn it. All the information about Assassin disappeared again.”

The way Assassin was able to slip away no matter how much they chased after her was truly superb. But this time, this time Sieg wouldn't let her get away.

Sieg began walking in search of Jack the Ripper—but then his vision suddenly distorted, and an instant later, he found himself in a different place once more.

—Sieg couldn't deny that, up until that moment, he had held certain illusions about humans.

—He had only gained self-consciousness a few days ago and, even if he had knowledge, he had no experience, so it was hard to say that he had understood how deep the evil deeds of humans went.

—Most of all, the fact that he was blessed with the people surrounding him being Heroic Spirits, those who were heroes in the past, had the biggest effect on his view of things.

—The world is beautiful. How many sacrifices had people made in order to speak those words? Sieg still hadn't comprehended that.

Laugh, laugh, laugh.

This place is the lowest plane of the world. This is none other than Cocytus, the very bottom of hell. Of course, I don't know if there's actually a hell. I know nothing of such things.

Visitors here come to understand just one thing. 'This place is definitely hell.' London, Whitechapel, a great human meat processing plant. It's a nest of Jorougumo² where escape is impossible if you fall down into it.

This place is packed with everything within Pandora's Box, except for hope. All kinds of disasters, all kinds of despair, continually flux, converge and rain down like dirty mud here.

2. Jorougumo: a spider monster/spirit in Japanese myth. More details here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jorōgumo>

Prostitutes who are like monstrous creatures both without and within sell their bodies, and shelve the money they earn by selling the life they were born with.

Splat, splat.

Repeat, repeat.

Splat, splat.

Treatment, treatment, treatment, treatment.

Blood flowed in a river. The factories are discharging waste anyways, so it's no big deal if we increase the protein.

It's truly no big deal. No problem at all. If you consider the size of the world's great flow, this is just a little smidge of dirty mud.

Hands protrude from that dirty mud, and monsters are born.

That's why this place is hell, purgatory, the corrupt city of Babylon where inhuman monsters live.

Sieg watched.

He watched a very young girl be violated by a large hairy man in order to get her daily food. He watched a young boy knock down the girl with a stick in order to steal her food. He watched the boy have the bread he risked his life to get stolen in turn by a cunning adult, and watched that bread finally arrive meaninglessly in the hands of someone else.

He saw an unborn fetus. He watched the people who had brought it into the world in an unchaste act of intercourse then dispose of it.

Children weren't killed in this hell. Children were expended.

Thus, light gradually disappeared from the eyes of children. The world, like silk cloth, twined around their bodies, and they were swallowed by snakes without moving an inch.

It was ugly.

It was far too ugly.

If there was some great evil, he could understand. If there was some enormous, wicked villain—someone like that who ruled them, then Sieg would still have been able to hold onto his illusions about humans. But,

this was a *system*. A bad debt that was created when humans built and developed a city. Or perhaps it was just pus.

No one was blamed and denounced. No one was saved. No, saving anyone here was impossible. The act of salvation itself wasn't acknowledged by the system.

"Stop it."

Sieg trembled and kneeled down on the ground. He had been on the verge of death many times up until now, but those times were all cases of bodily death. But the sight of this was killing Sieg's heart.

"Stop it... Please, I'm begging you, stop it!"

His illusions were contaminated and the scene that should have been beautiful grew faded and dull.

"— Yes. That's right."

When he came to his sense, his surroundings had changed once more. There was thick fog in the air, blocking out all moonlight... It was a truly chilly night. *Whose voice was that just now?*—Sieg wondered as he looked around, and finally noticed.

Sieg was standing alone on a deserted street somewhere.

"...What's right?"

Sieg resolutely questioned the voice. He saw a shadow move in an alleyway. He chased after it without hesitation.

At the dead-end of the back alley, there stood a girl in tattered clothing.

For some reason, he knew who she was—she was Jack the Ripper.

"I'll ask you again. What's right?"

The girl replied in a strangely distorted voice.

"The world is ugly."

Hearing a rustling sound behind him, Sieg turned around—and there too stood a girl in tattered clothing. That girl opened her mouth.

“That’s why we wanted to go back.”

“...Go back where?”

Another rustle. This time, it came from above—and walking casually on a building’s wall was another girl in tattered clothing.

“Back inside mother’s belly.”

Another one appeared. Every one of them looked at Sieg with hollow eyes.

“We wanted to go back.”

“We wanted to go back.”

“We just wanted to go back inside mother’s belly.”

“So why? Why is everyone so mean to us?”

“We wanted to be saved. So why did no one save us?”

“Were we bad?”

“Were we hated?”

Sieg couldn’t give an adequate answer to those questions. The premise of ‘wanting to live’ did not exist for these girls.

The girls grabbed Sieg’s arms. The girls melted while smiling with tears falling from their eyes and permeated inside of Sieg.

“The world—is so very ugly. *We* know that. Despite that, do you still want to live?”

Those words... dealt the most fatal wound of all to the heart of the boy who did not yet know the world.

Ruler had also been sucked into the girls’ —*Jack’s* nightmare. Ruler walked down a road filled with the stench of rotting bodies.

“This place is... England?”

In Trifas, though the architectural style had been that of the Middle Ages, the town itself had a properly maintained sanitation system. But this place was the opposite. The buildings here were modern in style, the kind that Laetitia was familiar with in her memories. But the streets were filled with strife and unsanitary conditions.

This was the city where Jack the Ripper was born. A freezing fog and a pitch black night. In the midst of that, Ruler walked down the street.

Before she realized it, her armor had disappeared, and her holy flag was gone from her hand as well. However, she didn't feel helpless at all. She continued walking straight ahead in a dignified manner.

She had a rough idea as to the nature of this illusion. She also understood how to escape from it—no, how to bring it down.

...It meant doing something sorrowful. Even if the end result would be a blessing, someone would have to bear pain in order to achieve it.

A person, no, a child, who was the pure manifestation of innocence.

“—Even so. Nothing will start unless she is killed.”

After she took a single breath, Ruler's eyes were filled with strong determination. Her resolve was as sharp as a blade and as hard as steel.

There was a young girl in one of the back alleys. She glared at the holy maiden Jeanne d'Arc with eyes filled with despair. The girl's killing intent was that of the weak—but Ruler glared back at the girl without flinching. She released her own killing intent, which a hero would normally never direct at a despairing, victimized child.

The little girl was so shocked she retreated back a step. Ruler questioned her with a cold-hearted voice.

“What's wrong, Assassin of Black...? No, the girl who used to be Assassin of Black. The girl who held the name of Jack the Ripper, who wasn't really anyone. Do you intend to run away?”

“...Why aren't you scared?”

“Scared? Why is there a need to think of you as frightening? All of you are merely sorrowful victims.”

At those words, countless children appeared all around Ruler one after another. Their faces were each unique and yet they somehow had a sense of sameness. Every one of them was dirty and had eyes filled with a dark light.

This place was unmistakably the hell of this era. These children were the embodiment of it in human form.

No matter how heartless someone was, they would falter, feel fear and shudder if they were pushed down here. This place was the inner world that embodied of Jack the Ripper's Origin. A miniature garden of darkness that took form as Assassin was dying, filled with human ugliness.

"Great Holy Maiden."

"Lady Angel."

"Save us, save the pitiful, so pitiful Jack. Save us. Save us, help us, gives us your hand. Please, please, please—"

The children crowded around Ruler and clung to her with desperate expressions on their faces.

If she's a saint, then she can save them. If she's a saint, then she'll definitely grant them salvation. No, even without being a saint, as long as she was a decent human being, this was a situation where she should feel something for them.

And yet, Ruler did not quiver as she stood at the center of them—in fact, there was not the slightest tremble, sympathy or even pity on her face.

The holy maiden spoke harshly to them.

"—I cannot do that. I can save children who've lost their way and I can purify souls that have lingering regrets by praying. However, *Jack the Ripper alone cannot be saved by me.*"

The children froze.

"You have all already been included as part of 'his' legend. The murderer known as Jack the Ripper is already both *anybody and nobody*. Do you all truly understand that the people you killed were victims of Jack the Ripper? You know neither their names nor their faces. You only

sought your mother's face and killed them in the process, right?"

Jack the Ripper killed at least five prostitutes—

Jack the Ripper gouged out their organs—

Jack the Ripper sent a letter to a newspaper company—

Jack the Ripper is a doctor.

Jack the Ripper is a member of the Royal Family.

Jack the Ripper is a painter.

Jack the Ripper is an ordinary person that can be found anywhere.

All of these were lies, and all of these were true. Now that all kinds of rumors, gossip and guesses had become jumbled together, trying to grasp her identity outside of being Jack the Ripper was an unimaginably difficult act.

She was anybody and nobody. She was nobody and anybody.

The problem was—that the number of possibilities was close to infinite. Because of that, the Anti-Heroic Spirit Jack the Ripper included all the possibilities in this world.

Most likely, the Holy Grail had tried to call forth a 'Jack the Ripper' that embodied all of these possibilities.

"That's right. You all have all been made part of Jack the Ripper. You might have been forced to become part of him... But that's why, even if I can kill you, I can't save you."

"—No way..."

"No—"

"We, we—"

Unrest ran through the children. Though they sought salvation, they contaminated everyone they came across. They truly were evil spirits. Though it was only vaguely, they understood their own end.

This holy maiden's prayers weren't salvation for them—

“...It seems you finally understand. I'll commence destroying you all now.”

Her prayers were a Baptism Rite for completely annihilating their existence.

“The Lord's blessing is deep, His love is eternal and constant.”

“Why... Why are you...!?”

“This is natural providence... You should already understand. You have all been transformed by your inflated hatred and the despair of the people you killed. Not one of you can be separated from the concept of ‘Jack the Ripper’ anymore.”

“You dwell in the deserted wasteland, not knowing the path to your proper place.”

They were all molded together as one into ‘Jack the Ripper’.

Not a single one of them even had a name of their own. They were not recognized as individuals by the world.

“Hunger, thirst, the soul withers.”

“No! No, we, we are—!”

“Then do you all have individual names?”

The children's breathing halted. That was a forbidden question. These children, who had been thrown away while still a fetus, had no names. Even if humans had names, mere cells did not.

"Speak His name and be saved. Speak the name of the One who will guide you to your proper place."

"In that case—"

Ruler slowly held out her right hand. At that moment, a shout rang out from somewhere.

"Stop... stop, Ruler...!!"

"Archer of Red...!?"

Ruler was shocked as she saw Archer of Red glaring at her with an arrow nocked on her bow. Her right arm was tainted black and it was clear that she was being possessed by an evil spirit.

"What are you doing, Archer!? Your right arm—"

Archer interrupted Ruler's words by shooting the arrow.

"Shut up! Right back at you, what are you trying to do!? *They're children!* They're merely children, innocent souls. *They aren't evil!* They're victims, pitiful souls that were crushed by the system of the world! Why are you killing them!?"

The evil spirits reacted to Archer of Red's words and gathered behind her all at once. They probably sensed a strong will to protect them from her.

Ruler had no weapons. In the first place, this was an illusionary world. Nothing would be settled no matter how much they tried to kill each other here, and the arrow Archer had fired had no effect either.

...That bow and arrow were Archer's will. A pure and simple will of retribution that declared she would kill Ruler if she killed these children.

Does she feel sympathy for them? thought Ruler as she glared at Archer—and was glared at in return.

“Archer, you should also understand as a Heroic Spirit. *Those children cannot be saved.* For them to live only results in increasing the number of their own kind. In the first place—returning their souls to a peaceful place is an act of kindness.”

Without any hesitation, Archer of Red fired another arrow. The steel arrowhead pierced the ground’s stone paving. Archer was sorrowfully earnest, and yet fatally mistaken.

“What kindness!? *Saving others is the duty of a saint!* Maid of Orleans, for what purpose did you wield a flag instead of a sword on the battlefield!? It was in order to not kill, wasn’t it!? In order to not bloody your hands—”

“—Is that what you think, Archer of Red?”

Ruler spoke in a cold voice. It was a blade-like voice that was so sharp it even overwhelmed, for just an instant, the huntress who had run through battlefields.

“Since I didn’t use a sword, my hands weren’t bloodied? *Ridiculous.* —I participated in those battles. I decided to fight. From that instant, it was the same as if my own hands were stained in blood. Don’t take me so lightly. I will not hesitate to destroy those children!”

Those words angered Archer of Red from the depths of her heart, and she shouted as if snarling at Ruler.

“Then, then. You aren’t a saint...!”

“That’s exactly right, Archer of Red. Everyone called me a saint, but *I myself* have never once thought of myself that way.”

Archer of Red’s expression turned shocked. If she was a saint, it was possible she could save these children. Archer might have thought that.

“This place is the world of these children’s memories, merely an illusion created by their residual thoughts. Do you intend to continue letting them suffer eternally in this vague and ambiguous world!? Please, move aside.”

Though visibly in anguish, Archer of Red firmly remained where she stood.

“... guh... I... refuse! If I, if I abandon these children, then who will love them!? You said you would return their souls to a peaceful place,

Ruler. That's merely extinguishing them, merely murder! I—"

Both Archer and Ruler's words halted. One of the girls hiding behind Archer's back stepped up to Ruler. *What a vast and lost expression—like a puppy thrown out into the wild*, Ruler thought.

"Hey."

In response to that voice of appeal, Ruler bended down to her knees and met the child's gaze. Regardless of the reasons, what Ruler was about to do was unmistakably a 'sin'. At the very least, she mustn't avert her eyes from it.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Are you... okay with killing us?"

Those words pierced Ruler's heart like a sword. She clenched her teeth—and endured it.

If they could be saved, she would have already saved them. If they could be helped, she would have already helped them. But she couldn't. Ruler understood that it was something she was unable to do.

"Even so. Even so, we must all move forward."

Ruler bit her lip hard, causing blood to flow out. The instant they saw that, the agitation and fear of 'Jack the Ripper' disappeared.

"No... no, stop... please stop...!"

The children hiding behind Archer of Red walked up to Ruler one by one. Archer of Red tried to pull them back—and as if rejecting that, the children slipped through her arms.

"—It can't be helped, huh?"

"Yes. It can't be helped. May you all find peace."

Like cats that realized their end, the children took Ruler's hand without running away. Archer of Red understood then. *It couldn't be helped.*

The death of these children was inevitable, a fact that couldn't be overturned.

Most of all, these children had rejected her—so she couldn't move. She could only watch as a spectator in this illusionary world.

"He satiates the thirsty souls and satisfies the hungry souls with good."

The chant solemnly and smoothly began extinguishing the children's existence. This wasn't the normal second death of a Servant, but a literal erasure. They were being removed from the axis of the cycle of rebirth, and they would no longer be summoned as 'Jack the Ripper' in any other Holy Grail War.

It was both salvation and not salvation. Becoming a Servant meant gaining a second life, but to them, this was effectively their first life.

Holding hands with each other, the children stared at Ruler.

"Give salvation to those who suffer and are bound in iron within the deep darkness."

They were disappearing. They weren't ascending to heaven, nor sinking into the darkness; they were merely dissolving into the world like mist.

"Ah—"

As she chanted, Ruler didn't let her grave and solemn expression break at all. If she cried, the children would know that she was saddened by their death, and they would probably leave behind lingering regrets in this world. That's why Ruler remained standing there firmly like steel.

"Now, let your shackles be broken, and be freed from the deep darkness."

"We don't want to die—"

She nearly crumbled at the children's whisper—but she didn't allow her posture to break. Without the slightest tremble, she simply continued 'disposing' of the children dispassionately.

"Grant salvation to those who have fallen ill from acts stained in sin and who are troubled by injustice."

The children began disappearing one after another, and at the same time, the nightmarish London also began disappearing.

This place was reconstructed from their memories, so if they disappeared, this city's existence would inevitably be rejected.

And then, everything was in darkness. There was only one young girl left. She stared at the holy maiden with pure eyes.

"We're going to disappear?"

"Yes. That is natural providence."

"Is that so? Yeah, that's right. We can't return anywhere or be anywhere. We spun in circles, ran in circles, and weren't able to reach anywhere."

After murmuring that, the girl laughed and then asked a final question.

"—Are you sad?"

"...No. You all are merely returning to your proper place. There's nothing to be sad about."

The holy maiden replied in a hard voice.

"So, I won't cry."

The holy maiden didn't cry. She covered her heart with a thick shell, and calmly crushed the children underfoot. She had no right to feel sad. As someone who wasn't judging their sins, but simply couldn't allow their existence—she had no right to mourn.

"A song of joy for the just, and silence for the unjust."

She recited the holy words.

The little girl, without smiling or looking sad, accepted it with empty eyes.

"—Pax Exeuntibus: Grant peace to these departing souls."

“...How sad.”

Leaving behind those words which pitied the holy maiden, the final girl vanished—and the fog cleared away. Ruler’s knees didn’t bend or collapse. She didn’t cry, and she didn’t let out a single sob. She did not show any pity or compassion for the children who weren’t even allowed to live.

Sympathy simply called forth victims. If she lost herself in it, everything would be wasted.

She had killed with her own hands the victimized children who sobbed out ‘We just want to go back’. It was no one’s fault and no one could be blamed; it was simply an act of murder carved in sin.

Blood flowed out from her tightly clenched lips.

Ruler had personally tasted the heavy karma of humans just now.

Even so.

Even so, she didn’t let her heart be crushed. Ruler warily gazed at Archer of Red. She was also worried about Sieg, who had also been caught up in that illusion along with her—but she was certain that, if she moved her gaze away from Archer even slightly, she would fall into a fatal situation.

Even now that they had returned to reality, Archer was crouching on the ground, her body shivering. *Like a wounded beast*, thought Ruler. Regardless, it was clear that Archer of Red had lost herself.

...It still hadn’t been decided for sure that they were enemies. Ruler still hadn’t confirmed *which side* Archer, Lancer and Rider of Red had chosen after their group left.

But, based on Archer’s behavior just now—

“Ruler... You killed them.”

A hollow voice resounded terribly through the dark night of the city.

Ruler immediately understood from that voice.

“Yes. The one who killed them was me, for certain.”

She was an enemy. She would never get along with Ruler —

After staggering to stand up, Archer shouted as her entire body trembled with killing intent.

“I see. You’re also on the side that discards them. Even though those children just wanted to live. You’re on the side that tramples over them!?”

A deep killing intent exuded from her eyes along with tears. She was so enraged that blood trickled down from her lips.

It was only briefly, but Ruler did exchange words with Archer on the battlefield previously — but no trace of her aloof attitude from back then could be seen now.

It wasn’t because they were enemies or allies, but because Ruler wounded something that was equivalent to Archer’s soul.

Heroes had things that mustn’t be touched. For Archer of Red, that was children. Since Ruler didn’t save those children who existed as Jack the Ripper, she was now nothing more than an enemy to Archer of Red.

Even if those children were beings that absolutely couldn’t be saved, Archer of Red still struggled to save them. No matter how much anguish and despair it brought her, she never gave up.

“...No matter what I say, you won’t understand, Archer of Red.”

“— Those children could have been saved.”

“No, they couldn’t. Those children were, in the end, evil spirits. The concept of ‘being saved’ doesn’t exist for them. That’s why, no matter how much they continue to seek warmth—they will *destroy* those who could give that warmth to them.”

Archer of Red struck her hand against the stone building next to her. With a loud crack, the wall crumbled away as if it were brittle.

“Shut up! They could have... they could have been saved! Even if it was impossible with my own power, they could have been with the *power of the Holy Grail!*”

With the power of the Holy Grail, she said. In other words, that meant having the Holy Grail grant her wish.

But Shirou Kotomine should have been in control of the Holy Grail.

As Ruler was about to question this discrepancy, Archer of Red nocked an arrow on her bow without waiting for her to speak. But, by the time she did so, Archer of Black had caught sight of the two female Servants once the fog cleared and had already aimed his own shot at Archer of Red before she could fire.

“—αστραπη χειμων: Ferocity is the Hammer of the Gods³.”

The three arrows he fired were all filled with as much prana as they could take. Though it may not have worked against Rider or Saber of Red, Archer of Red had no defense strong enough to withstand arrows containing this much destructive power. If they hit her, she would almost definitely die at once.

But—only if they hit.

The stone-paved ground exploded, forming a huge crater. But Archer of Red had avoided all three arrows with frighteningly agile movements while howling like a beast. *Those movements like a four-legged beast... as expected of a hunter that lived in the wild*, Archer of Black thought with a bitter expression.

But Archer of Red had no interest in the shots fired at her just now. Without even looking in Archer of Black’s direction, she sharply snarled like a beast—and shouted at Ruler with deep hatred, as if vomiting blood.

“—I won’t forgive you!! Ruler, I won’t forgive your deception-filled life! False holy maiden—I will never forgive you for having killed those children instead of saving them! If you’re going to steal the Holy Grail, come and get it. I, Atalanta, shall shoot you all down without leaving a single survivor!”

Glaring at her enemy, Ruler, while gasping in anguish, Archer of Red quickly retreated.

When she was alive, the men who were charmed by Atalanta’s beauty were given a trial. Beat her in a foot race. Losing meant death. Even so,

3. αστραπη χειμων: Greek for “lightning storm”.

the men who didn't give up challenged her one after another—and all of them lost.

Rider of Red was one of the few people who possessed speed equal to hers. Even the great Greek sage Chiron couldn't pursue her when it came to pure running speed.

“—Are you running away, Archer of Red?”

Archer of Black said that, thinking she would come fight him if provoked. But Archer of Red didn't even glance at Archer of Black once, and swiftly ran away within the darkness of the night.

“...We can't catch up with her.”

Ruler could tell. Archer of Red had retreated from the battle area in a mere instant, and she would slip out of this city in less than a minute. She was most likely here as a scout, and even if there had been a ripe opportunity for it, it was irregular for her to move to kill Assassin of Black earlier.

She had most likely acted in order to save the children that Assassin hurt. But her arrow had unleashed something in Assassin of Black. Normally, a Servant would have their connection to this world severed and vanish when their spiritual core was destroyed—or when their Master died.

But, instead, Assassin of Black had reproduced that scene of hell at the end of her life...

Ruler shook her head, and for the time being, put aside the various matters that needed to be considered later. The safety of this area had been secured, so next she had to find Sieg—

“Sieg-kun!”

Reprimanding her own strife-filled and screaming heart, Ruler began searching her surroundings. Sieg should have also been dragged into that fog along with her. She had managed to endure it, but could that painfully pure boy endure—?

Ruler quickly found Sieg lying unconscious on the ground, curled up in a fetal position. She lifted him up with her arms and called out to him.

"Pull yourself together... Please pull yourself together, Sieg-kun!"

Trembling weakly, Sieg woke up. And without even giving Ruler the time to pat her chest in relief, he grasped her arm and asked her.

"Ruler, what was that?"

"Sieg-kun... please calm down."

But Sieg was tensed and strained. He questioned Ruler with a confused and lost expression.

"Those were *normal* humans? Not magi, but ordinary humans created hell that easily?"

Sieg's shock was great, as to be expected. Servants were beings of abnormal power and therefore separate from the world of humans. Magi were those who were human and yet separate from human reason.

And, excluding other homunculi, the number of ordinary humans he had met was quite few, consisting of only the old man he met on the other side of the forest when he ran away and the people he encountered in town today.

Of course, he hadn't expected for humans to be perfectly good.

But—he had believed they weren't evil. He would never have thought that they could create a hell like that by their own will.

What should Ruler tell him, as he sat there on the verge of tears even now? That even those people hadn't wished to create that hell? That it was because human survival instinct permitted evil? No, the problem was that he wanted to believe that *people were good*.

But Ruler knew that that was wrong.

"...Most likely, I saw the same thing as you did."

Sieg looked at Ruler in surprise.

"Listen, Sieg-kun. What you asked isn't something even I can answer. It's true that a great and pure cruelty, which excuses all kinds of terrible and unjust acts, exists within human beings."

Jeanne d'Arc had experienced it firsthand. She was betrayed and

had her life and pride trampled over in various ways. It would to be wrong not to call that evil. And the ones who trampled upon her weren't natural-born villains or those who had been raised to be evil, but simply ordinary humans who had judged Jeanne d'Arc as an enemy.

That's why she understood that humans committed evil even without falling into evil.

She was aware that, even if people were individually good, they were evil as a whole.

Even so—

She strongly gripped clasped Sieg's hands with her hand. Not wanting to show her expression, she bowed her head.

"Even so, please don't give up yet. Please, please..."

Please don't give up on humans.

Please don't give up and say 'That's all they are'. Because becoming disillusioned with humans is easy, and hating humans is even easier, but continuing to love humans is hard.

"You—"

Sieg spoke up. Ruler listened to him without raising her head.

"You still haven't given up?"

Even though she said that humans weren't evil in themselves, didn't she acknowledge that humans could be an ugly and wicked existence?

Even though she was gripped by such despair that she was unable to add anything after saying 'Even so'—

You still love humans?

Ruler raised her head. Her smile was pure and noble.

"Yes. I haven't given up."

Those proud words just barely managed to stop the chaos and disgust inside Sieg. Sieg also knew of Jeanne d'Arc's past.

Even though she had experienced such a terrible death, she said that she still hadn't given up. Then, someone as young and inexperienced as

him shouldn't give up yet either.

He still hadn't seen anything of the world yet. It was too soon to come to a conclusion.

Of course, just remembering that scene invoked such disgust in him that it made him feel like vomiting. Ruler said she hadn't given up, but... for her to have to think 'I won't give up' in the first place—

It meant that the world was filled with that much undefined evil.

Stifling the gloomy feelings inside him, Sieg somehow managed to stand up.

"It appears it's over."

Sieg turned around, and saw Archer of Black elegantly jump down from above. He landed soundlessly like a feather.

"Yes. Do the people that got dragged into the fog need medical treatment? I can also help a little with my magecraft."

"The people who fainted are seriously hurt, but not so much that they'll die. My Master is already making arrangement for them to be taken care of."

"Then, about the children—"

Ruler asked with a worried face, but Archer of Black smiled to put her at ease.

"It seems they were intentionally excluded from the effects of the fog. They only have some scratches from when they fought both of you."

"I see. Thank goodness..."

Ruler sighed and patted her chest in relief. After finishing his report, Archer of Black immediately went back into spiritual form and headed off to return to his Master.

"With this, it's over."

"Yes. At the very least... everything concerning Assassin of Black is

finished.”

Absentmindedly, Sieg remembered the scene he glimpsed in the fog at the end—more specifically, the voices he heard back then.

Archer of Red, who was laid out accusations filled with killing intent, and Ruler, who responded with a cool voice.

Archer of Red had yelled at her several times, “You killed those children.” While lying incapacitated on the ground, Sieg had thought in shock that she meant the children they had protected from Assassin of Black, but it seemed Archer of Red had been talking about the children who appeared in that illusory world.

Sieg’s general knowledge was enough for him to understand what kind of beings those children were.

Those children were what brought the Servant Assassin of Black into existence... in other words, they were like the foundation of existence known as ‘Jack the Ripper’. Naturally, they were already dead.

Even so, if they were left alone, they might have possessed some powerless human. In that case, it was highly possible that a Jack the Ripper *with a living human body* would have appeared.

Of course, they were low-class evil spirits. The most they would have been able to do was give someone the urge to commit murder, and they would have lacked any supernatural powers.

Even so, victims would definitely appear. That’s why Ruler killed those children—by extinguishing them with the Baptism Rite chant. Sieg could understand that that decision was correct and definitely an act of justice.

Yet, why had Archer of Red cursed Ruler like that? And why had Ruler kept accepting her words?

It was irrational. It was far too irrational. Even though she was a hero who had accumulated various achievements in life, didn’t Ruler think that it was far too unreasonable?

When Sieg asked Ruler about it, she scrunched her brow in sorrow and murmured.

“—Most likely, Archer of Red had never seen that kind of [evil] before.”

“Never... seen it?”

“There are various forms of hell. Atalanta might have seen villages massacred by evil beings. She might have seen the tyrannical rule of heinous kings.”

But that hell was different from those. There was no justice in that Whitechapel district. Such a thing as justice didn’t existence anywhere there.

But—*they weren’t evil*. The queen of that era, the doctors, the policemen, the criminals, the prostitutes, the orphans—none of them were either evil or just. The sky of that city had just been too heavy. It was like that oppressive grey sky had been crushing all of them.

Indeed, ‘Jack the Ripper’ was evil. But her origin was simply—the small wish of the abandoned to ‘return to a peaceful place’.

“...That’s why you apologized?”

“Yes. Remember this well, Sieg-kun.”

Ruler turned around—and gave a transient smile illuminated by the faint streetlights.

“Evil and justice can be interchanged infinitely depending on where one stands. At the very least, I am definitely [evil] to Archer of Red.”

“You, are evil...?”

“Yes. It’s just as Archer of Red said. I also think so myself. I—am not anything like a saint.”

Ruler said she wasn’t a saint.

That was a denial of herself, a lie towards the people who idolized her. Sieg was shocked and gazed at her—but Ruler averted her eyes.

“Now, let’s go back, Sieg-kun. If we’re too slow, your Servant will get angry.”

She smiled as if to push aside the previous discussion and began walking. Sieg decided to obediently follow after her. While gazing at her

back, Sieg recalled the evil hell that ordinary humans had created.

He was certain that he would recall that scene countless times in the future. Each time he did, he would probably waver and become unable to believe in humanity.

There might be individual people that he'll come to like. But that might be merely a small piece of goodness washed away amidst overwhelming evil—

Sieg would continue to ponder over humans and the world they create.

Would he eventually be able to come to a conclusion?

Humans are good/Humans are evil.

Or perhaps he would acknowledge that humans were neither under some unknown concept? Sieg didn't know. It was far too much to shoulder for a newborn homunculus.

The confusion due to the feelings born in him, the confusion due to the abnormality of his situation, his own yet-unseen destination.

His mind was a mess, and the most he could believe in was his own Servant and Ruler's smile—

"I am not anything like a saint."

Her confession just now was incredibly important. It was something he mustn't forget. That's how Sieg felt. But he didn't understand the meaning behind it.

He had no idea why the saint who should have been acknowledged by everyone derided herself as being evil and murmured that it was impossible for her to be a saint.

If he asked her, would she tell him why?

“...No, that’s no good.”

Sieg immediately discarded that idea. Questioning everything and getting an answer to everything from others was probably wrong. He needed to think for himself and understand it on his own.

Even if it was a question that might never be answered, even if the answer was lost in the darkness—he mustn’t stop the act itself of searching for that answer.

When Archer of Red returned to the **Hanging Gardens of Babylon: Aerial Gardens of Vanity** where the Greater Grail was stored, she dispassionately reported to her Master Shirou that she had shot down Assassin of Black.

“If possible, I would have like it if Assassin of Black kept causing a disturbance among the enemy camp a little while longer...”

Assassin of Red spoke up in a bored manner from where she sat calmly on her throne.

“It doesn’t matter. Either way, they will definitely chase after us. Since we’re in an all-out war, it would be troublesome to have trash like that moving unnecessarily.”

“That’s true enough... Ah, by the way, Archer. Did you find out which Heroic Spirit Assassin of Black was?”

Archer of Red replied in a completely apathetic, bored manner.

“There’s no point in worrying over those already slain.”

“...Hmm. Yes, it’s just as you say, but...”

Shirou’s gaze became slightly suspicious. Archer of Red wore an annoyed expression and didn’t respond. There was something more important she needed to think about right now—all her focus was on her hated enemy.

“I’m tired... that’s all I have to report.”

After saying that, she left the throne room. Her Master Shirou tilted his head in puzzlement at having seen something strange.

"What's wrong, Master?"

"...No. I'm a little concerned about Archer of Red's behavior."

"She looks the same as always to me."

Archer of Red was a fundamentally cool-headed person. She wasn't indifferent, but even if someone died in front of her eyes, she wouldn't raise an eyebrow.

Perhaps it was because she had lived her life amidst the exceedingly harsh providence of nature. Her thoughts were extremely cool and sober when it came to life and death—including her own.

That's why she wouldn't care about the people she killed, no matter who they were, since their deaths changed nothing.

Certainly, in that regard, her behavior was not that different from her usual attitude. But Shirou couldn't get rid of a feeling of something out of place.

...And then he realized. She had said she was 'tired'. But there was no way the likes of Atalanta could feel tired from a simple scouting mission.

Immediately before she turned around, Shirou had seen Archer of Red's face from the side.

Her beautiful face, which countless men had sought to marry her for, had been exuding unconcealed hatred and rage towards someone.

Archer of Red silently walked through the Hanging Gardens. Her pace was quick, as if she was trying to shake off that scene carved into her memories. But before she could go anywhere, a single man came to stand in her path.

"...Out of the way, Caster."

Archer glanced at Caster in displeasure. Caster spoke to her while wearing his usual smile that was as deep and opaque as the bottom of the sea.

"[Good things of day begin to droop and drowse; While night's black agents to their preys do rouse]... Were you captured by the night, exalted swift-running huntress?"

Archer grabbed the collar of Caster's shirt as if she were fed up with him—and pushed him against a wall.

"I'm tired. Very tired. So shut up, you clown."

But Caster didn't shut up.

"There is no way you of all people would be tired from a mere scouting mission! And you aren't tired, but frightened, are you not? Just like a child who's unable to escape into sleep after hearing a scary story!"

"Shut up!"

Archer's gaze oozed with killing intent. Her eyes declared that she would kill him if he joked around any further. Nevertheless—Caster questioned her, his smile never breaking.

"—What did you see? What did you perceive? How foolish. No matter what you saw, it is already *merely a remnant of the past*. We are ghosts of the past, and if ghosts regret the past, they become merely vengeful spirits."

The words of the clown, who shouldn't have known anything, gouged the deepest depths of Archer's heart.

"You bastard...!!"

Suddenly, all life and energy disappeared from Caster's body. In the blink of an eye, the man she grasped by the collar was reduced to a mere wooden puppet.

A spell used by the author Caster... or rather, a kind of sleight of hand that combined his immense fame and enigmatic history.

"—We must live in the future. To devote our bodies to the yet-unseen world. Archer, you also want to see it, don't you? *A world where all children are loved!*"

At some unknown point, Caster had crept up behind her back. Hearing him voice her wish, Archer stopped as she was about to grab him by the cuff again. The one in front of her didn't seem like a puppet this time.

Caster of Red gave a thin smile and closed one eye.

"For the sake of that, we must activate the Greater Grail. Through any means possible."

"...You really believe that it will grant that wish?"

"You heard our Master's words, did you not? That Greater Grail can certainly grant his and your wish."

Hearing that answer, distress and conflict filled Archer of Red's face. Caster's words were truly like the devil's whisper.

"I—don't know. Certainly, if it's his wish, it might have the power to grant my wish as well. But... but, is it really all right? Is that wish truly... correct?"

"Who knows? I don't know either. No, let me put it like this. Are you unable to decide unless there's a guarantee? [To be or not to be]—in that case, a clown can only laugh!"

Archer glared at Caster for a little while—but a little bit of life had returned to her eyes. She silently walked away from him.

Caster called out from behind her.

"By the way, Archer-dono. In the end, just what kind of hell did you see?"

Keeping her back to him, Archer whispered softly.

"...It was a piece of the world's system. Gods, heroes, magical beasts, evil kings—everything was *dead* there."

If an evil being committed a crime, then she would eliminate it.

If a god went on a rampage, then she would search for a method to soothe it.

But there was neither there. It was a part of mechanism of the world, working so superbly well that it created a perfect system that preyed on the weak.

There was only one way to destroy it.

The fulfillment of her wish by the activation of the Greater Grail. That was Archer's only hope now.

"I couldn't save them with my own power... But, even though that woman could have saved them, she abandoned them and cut them down."

Her fists trembled with rage—and, even while understanding that this question was a landmine, Caster of Red asked her without holding back his curiosity.

"That woman?"

Turning around at the question, Archer of Red's eyes were filled with dreadful glee.

"Jeanne d'Arc. I will kill that woman. I'll shoot her down with my arrows, and if that doesn't work, I will rip her apart with my claws, and if that doesn't work, I will tear her to shreds with my fangs."

"Oh my, is that possible with your beautiful nails and teeth?"

With unfading madness in her eyes, Archer of Red smiled in joy from the bottom of her heart.

"It's possible. If it's to kill that woman, *I will even become a monster.*"

Archer of Red departed, and Caster watched her leave. At some unknown point, Rider of Red had come to stand behind Caster.

"A mouth that runs off so much can be a nuisance, you know."

Caster turned around at Rider's sharp voice—and laughed.

"Hahaha. After all, the only weapons I have are daggers of words!"

Rider didn't believe that this man had given advice to the troubled Archer out of the kindness of his heart.

Caster was clearly planning something. The problem was that his intentions were unclear.

Perhaps he simply found it amusing to mislead her with words... actually, that was quite possible.

"More importantly, how about you go comfort Archer-dono yourself, Rider-dono?"

Caster's words were correct. It was true that it was important for Rider to soothe the Archer of Red in her current dangerous state. But there a matter that took priority over that. It was something he had to ask Caster in front of him.

"Hmph. I'll go comfort nee-san later. What I'm more concerned about is—"

"What are we waiting for, you mean?"

"That's right. You said you had to make preparations, Caster. Preparations for what? ...The Black camp is going to arrive here sooner or later. It doesn't seem like you're preparing any countermeasures against them."

"Naturally. In the first place, preparations for that are being taken care of by Assassin—our dear empress."

"So it seems."

The Hanging Gardens were a Noble Phantasm, and its owner was that unbearably unlikable Assassin of Red.

She had probably already made a plan for dealing with any attacks against them. Then, just what on earth was Caster, who shouldn't be capable of using magecraft, doing right now?

"Even if I cannot use magecraft, as a Servant of the Caster class, I have a technique to weave 'miracles'. Right now, I'm in the midst of making preparations for it, you could say."

"Miracles—huh?"

In other words, he meant his Noble Phantasm. Perhaps, like these Hanging Gardens, it required necessary materials or conditions, or perhaps it needed time to activate.

Either way, it was probably something not for battle, but to break out of the deadlock of this situation—thus Rider concluded.

"Now then, I will be on my way—ah, wait a minute. Speaking of which, Rider-dono. Archer of Black is your teacher Chiron, is he not?"

"...What about it?"

“No, I just wanted to ask how you have come to terms with the fate of clashing against your former teacher, even if you’re both Servants now.”

“Do you want to know?”

“Quite,” Caster replied with a nod. Without hesitating, Rider of Red materialized his beloved spear and pointed it at Caster.

“You wouldn’t understand even in a hundred years.”

Rider’s stern gaze radiated blatant killing intent. Rider of Red wasn’t a patient person at all. Regardless of the situation, any further mockery would cost Caster his life.

And, with it unclear whether or not he was aware of this, Caster calmly shrugged.

“So it’s like that. The pride and soul of noble warriors cannot be spoken of in words. In other words, you’re filled with such delight and sorrow to be facing each other as warriors that you cannot express it in mere words!”

“You really don’t listen to people at all, do you!?”

— And, even more annoyingly, when he heard his incredibly complex and indescribable feelings put into words like this, they became unexpectedly simple and clear.

“Damn it, this is giving me a headache.”

Scratching his head in frustration, Rider made his spear vanish. I’ll go make Lancer listen to my complaints, Rider decided as he turned his back on Caster—but he was called out to once again.

“Eventually, I will carve your story into writing as well. So I have a question. Should it be a tragedy, or a comedy?”

Too fed up with threaten Caster again with his spear, Rider replied immediately.

“It’s my life. Interpret it however you want. But, well—”

Suddenly, Rider's past flashed through his mind. He had been born the child of a hero and a goddess, was separated from his mother at a young age, learned, fought, love, hated, and died in battle.

That was probably something that could be expressed in words. With the infinite words that Shakespeare could spin, he could probably speak of and expose even Rider's true heart.

However, in the end, that was merely a story.

No matter how accurately it was expressed in words, his life belonged to him alone. That's why it was all the same to him whether it was a comedy or a tragedy.

Therefore, all that was left to decide was Rider's own preference.

"Make it a comedy. So ridiculous it makes people laugh. In fact, dying because only my heel is human and it was shot with an arrow is already far beyond ridiculous!"

Rider heartily laughed off his own life. Seeing that, Caster's smile vanished, and he deeply bowed his head.

"As you wish."

Even if he had some troubles, Rider believed himself to be fortunate.

At the very least, this second life of his wasn't filled with only bad things. There was someone he had wished to surpass in the past. The great sage who taught many heroes and knew all manner of martial arts and wisdom.

There was a hero who once had wondered whether he would be able to fight and surpass that man one day.

It was a wish Rider had left behind at some point during his days on the battlefield. But—his wish was now granted. Since it was granted, he treated it as fortunate.

However—Rider of Red still had doubts over whether or not Shirou Kotomine—no, Amakusa Shirou Tokisada's wish was truly enough to save the world.

He understood the reasoning. It was flawlessly correct. Rider, who understood human karma quite well, even now deemed that Shirou's plan was worthy for him to devote his spear in support.

But... even so, he had doubts. It was literally a revolution against the human species. There was no predicting what would become of the world afterwards.

But, at the very least, his Master believed in it. It was the conclusion he had reached after many decades. Most likely, he had already experienced the doubts that Rider was feeling.

Was it too fast or too slow? It was a problem that even Heroic Spirits couldn't reach a conclusion on.

...Amakusa Shirou Tokisada must have seen hell before. He must have certainly witnessed that scene of every single human in his sight being massacred. And, even so, he still wanted to save all of humanity.

That's why Rider of Red decided it was fine to acknowledge him as his Master.

He didn't think that was wrong. He didn't, but—

He still had some slight hesitation he couldn't get rid of. Rider was certain these feelings wouldn't disappear until he knew that the salvation of humanity had been correctly brought about.

Each of the Red Servants had been given their own rooms within the Hanging Gardens. Naturally, they could rest by going into spiritual form, but there were many Servants who preferred to stay materialized. Especially when there were no worries in regards to their prana supply.

However, the interior design of the rooms was quite cold and blunt. To Servants, who did not require sleep or food, personal rooms were simply for protecting their privacy. And even that privacy was almost completely useless considering the role they were summoned to this world for.

However, right now, Archer of Red needed to be alone.

She sat on the bed and threw off her leather gauntlets—and then she looked at her discolored right arm. There was a black bruise like a curled

snake twining around the skin of her arm.

It neither hurt nor inconvenienced her movements. But Archer could tell. This was a 'curse' of extremely high purity. Most likely, it was from *that darkness* which had swallowed her up when she killed Assassin of Black's Master.

Assassin of Black's repulsive past. The flocks of children, the grudge of the unborn fetuses. Right before Assassin of Black died and dispersed, this curse was probably engraved in Archer.

Of course, it would be easy to cut it off. Though Archer had no means to dispel curses, their group's Assassin had the abilities of a Caster. There was also the dual Master-Servant Shirou Kotomine to rely on.

If she asked for their aid, it probably wouldn't be hard to restore her right arm.

But—Archer couldn't choose that option no matter what. Naturally, she didn't want to rely on Assassin's help. The idea of showing any weakness to that woman wasn't even funny enough to be a joke.

And Shirou Kotomine was technically Assassin's Master. So she was naturally reluctant to request his help.

...No, those were all excuses. Archer understood. She had to accept this curse. This curse was the resentment of the children she loved more than anything else.

Fortunately, there was little pain since it was merely the work of low-class spirits.

And she didn't mind even if this curse brought about her own destruction. This was a punishment. A punishment she had to accept.

She wrapped bandages around her rotten-smelling right arm, and decided to leave it alone with that.

There was one thing that Archer hadn't noticed. It was true that what possessed her right arm were low-class vengeful spirits, too weak to have any effect on Archer herself. After all, Servants were the spirits of heroes who stood at the pinnacle of all spirits.

In the first place, it had been possible for Archer to reject the possession. The moment the vengeful spirits entered her arm, she could have even devoured them as sustenance without any danger to herself.

But she had refused to do that. In other words, she wished for ‘those children’ to maintain their consciousness. Of course, these vengeful spirits did not have any high-level intellect. They simply continued whispering their wish.

We want to go back, we want to go back, we want to go back. We want to go back inside Mother’s belly.

They could only whisper. They were vengeful spirits that should have been completely harmless. But Archer of Red felt ashamed at those whispers and felt compassion and pity.

Those were feelings that one must never have when facing vengeful spirits who only made appeals for their final wish. That compassion stirred up her emotions, and gradually made her hatred swell up towards both herself, who couldn’t save them, and that holy maiden, who didn’t save them.

“I don’t care.”

But Archer of Red accepted that hatred without hesitation. She couldn’t help cherishing those ephemeral, destructive feelings.

The more she hated herself and that woman—the more she could prove and believe in her own love.

So, for now, she would sharpen her fangs. In order to kill that false saint, Archer of Red continued to earnestly nurture her hatred.

Caster of Red watched Rider depart, and then headed off to his study. The Servant Caster possessed the class skill [Territory Creation]. This skill’s rank changed depending on the Servant’s ability, bloodline or occupation. If they were famous as a magus, they could even create a Temple, which surpassed a Workshop.

Caster of Red wasn't technically a magus... in the first place, someone like a writer didn't need a Temple or a Workshop. What he required was a study for writing.

Within the study that Caster of Red had constructed, there were mountains of books, a typewriter that Shirou had gotten for him (he had immediately abandoned it after getting it), a desktop computer (he had immediately abandoned this as well)—and a writing desk with a pen and paper on it.

It was a room quite disconnected from his class name as Caster. It truly was a study. Of course, if you considered that the piles of scrap paper in the room's garbage can were all part of *Shakespeare's new work*, it was a mystical room in a certain sense.

Caster of Red took out one of the books on the bookshelves. The book's title was [William Shakespeare's Comedies, Historical Dramas and Tragedies]—a book compilation commonly known as the 'First Folio'.

...However, this book wasn't something that Shakespeare had published himself. His friend had merely collected together his works after he died. In the first place, there were no manuscripts made from his personal handwriting.

After looking it over, he took out another, bulky leather-bound book beside it. The book had no title, and even the author's name wasn't inscribed on it.

The book he held now was different from the earlier one. This was a genuine book personally handwritten by him. But—he still hadn't finished writing it.

He cherishingly moved his fingers across where the text came to an interrupted halt.

“—Now then, it's certainly been following the path of a masterpiece until this point, but...”

The protagonist needed to go through many hardships. A life full of smooth sailing from beginning to end should be left to any average person you could find anywhere. A protagonist's story needed dramatic parts. Whether the story was a tragedy, a comedy, or something else entirely, unique people had equally unique lives.

In that sense, Shirou Kotomine was infinitely close to Caster's ideal. Regardless of whether or not his wish was granted, his end would no doubt be impressive.

Contained in these bookshelves were books recounting the stories of all the people involved in the Great Holy Grail War.

They included both those who had already lost and vanished and those who had been killed off-hand. Naturally, among them was the book of that country girl—Jeanne d'Arc. He admitted that he had been slightly wrong to utterly make fun of her when he was alive just because she had been England's enemy.

She wasn't some pitiful, mad country girl. *It would have been far better for her if that's all she was.* She was someone who understood her own sins and yet still didn't stop being a saint—a girl who fought against despair.

"When classifying those known as saints, they can be properly described as those who save people and fight not out of personal desire, but against the despair of this evil world. In that case, regardless of the end results, the two of them are naturally and unmistakably saints."

To save his people, to save her homeland; regardless of the scale, they had stood up and fought.

"However, their paths ended up being different. My Master, who acts to save all of humanity, and the Holy Grail's protector, who moves to stop that. To think their good intentions would be turned inside out into ill will towards each other, how tragic! [Honor travels in a strait so narrow, Where one but goes abreast.]"

Their confrontation with each other couldn't be avoided, and their tale was so fascinating. Even though they were both trying to save people, they were enemies who *had no choice but to kill one another.*

"I'd like it if the two of them squared off against each other at the very end, but—"

Caster closed the book and took out another one. This book was different from the last extravagant leather-bound one; it was a white and bluntly plain book.

This was the book of that homunculus. He should have been immature,

weak, and commonplace. No, even now, he was still commonplace. The only unique thing about him was the power he had received. The choices of those surrounding him had merely pushed the trait of being unique onto him.

But... but.

Even so, he continued to survive in the Great Holy Grail War. Though he had a short life, he chose to fight and desperately struggled. His short days alive were far too condensed to be called a human lifetime. Of course, homunculi were given knowledge from the moment they were born—or rather, they were artificial lifeforms that were born with knowledge. Most of them were boring, ordinary and uninteresting mass-produced beings.

That's why the abnormality of this homunculus stood out so much.

He was neither boring nor ordinary. It was just that he wasn't conspicuous within this Great Holy Grail War when all the Servants were far more abnormal than him—but that's what made him so amiss.

He wasn't a hero. But he wasn't an ordinary being either. He was a pitiful boy trifled with by fate, but he wasn't bothered by that.

In that case, what was his role in this Great Holy Grail War?

To act as recognition of the services of the holy maiden? To be a Master or Servant that was part of his side's forces? Or perhaps—he was the one who would square off against the person at the center of this battle, Shirou Kotomine—against Amakusa Shirou Tokisada?

“...Hmm, no, that's impossible.”

The only one who was equal to Amakusa Shirou Tokisada was the holy maiden Jeanne d'Arc. Everyone's awareness of that was unchanged. Most likely, the two of them would square off again in the final decisive battle.

There was no room for the homunculus to wedge himself in... No, he might be thrown in as part of the enemy forces, but he himself shouldn't be able to meddle in the part which touched upon the foundation of this war.

But even that possibility was about to vanish.

His Master's plan to save humanity would soon begin. Would Shirou Kotomine become a savior? Or—would he fail to save people once more and become a pitiful clown? Either way, Caster had no doubt it would be a tragic, comic and extremely enjoyable story.

Lancer of Red was in the room where the five *former* Masters—Rottweil Berzinsky, Gene Rum, the Pentel Brothers and Feend vor Sembren were relaxing.

The five of them sat equal distances apart around a circular table. They weren't actually confined here, but they talked while looking up at the ceiling with idiotic expressions.

"Speaking of which, according to what I hear, there's been a political change within the Atlas Academy—"

"Look at the minute detail of the ritual recorded on this scroll. It's expensive, but it's worth it—"

"Yes, quite right. Yes, yeah, exactly—"

"Ah, I'm looking forward to the auction so much. Just how long does the airplane intend to make me wait—"

"It's almost time to gradually begin the inheritance of our family's Crest, but my son is no good. He lacks the ambition to be a magus."

There was already no coherence in their discussion. They were trapped between sanity and madness. They were completely sane, and if they were truly in the same situation they thought they were, they would certainly react and speak the same as they did now.

However, this was the room that had been given to them by Shirou Kotomine and his Servant. Before they had summoned their own Servants, they had drunk poison prepared by Assassin of Red, and were lured into the world of madness while still remaining sane.

Their mastered mental defenses were mere paper-thin armor against Assassin of Red. They hadn't been killed—but they had no freedom either. They simply continued to exist in this room.

“—So you came here again.”

Assassin of Red idly emerged from out of the shadows. Lancer’s eyes couldn’t be deceived. She simply spoke her thoughts to Lancer. The Assassin standing here was merely an illusion as well.

“Shirou Kotomine’s orders were to guard these Hanging Gardens. There are currently no signs of any attacks. The enemy will most likely arrive tomorrow night.

Until then, I will remain here unless my former Master instructs otherwise.”

The empress’ face scowled in displeasure at Lancer of Red’s words.

Lancer of Red was the only one among the other three Servants who hadn’t acknowledged Shirou as his Master. Both Rider and Archer had abandoned their former Masters in this state of affairs, but Lancer alone still guarded them for the simple reason that one of them had summoned him.

Assassin of Red didn’t particularly care about that. Either way, in the end, Lancer of Red, like the others, was a pawn under their control.

But the problem was the five former Masters. They had drunk poison, causing their minds to roam through another world—but they were sane. In order to convince them to give up their Command Spells without their Servants noticing any abnormality, Semiramis had to avoid directly harming them.

Though she was Semiramis, the world’s oldest poisoner, she was unable to bring about satisfactory results under such unfavorable conditions. In other words, she didn’t know when they might wake up from their dream worlds.

Rider and Archer wouldn’t side with them at this point. But what about Lancer?

Even though he hadn’t exchanged a single word with his Master and the Master rights had been transferred to Shirou, he still continued to be a loyal Servant.

It was only natural that Assassin of Red’s mistrust would rise. If his Master awoke and gave an order, Lancer would undoubtedly betray them. Regardless of what the situation was.

Therefore, after a certain point, Assassin of Red had planned to kill these five, whom no one was interested in anymore. It was something trivial, amounting to the act of clearing away scattered garbage at best.

But Lancer had stood in her way.

“You all may think of these five however you wish. But as long as my Master is here, I won’t let you have your way with them.”

He had dispassionately declared that he would protect the five of them. Since then, he had continued obstructing Assassin of Red’s plot even while doing the extremely boring job of guarding the Hanging Gardens.

Of course, forcefully breaking through would be simple. Within these Hanging Gardens, Assassin of Red’s power and authority was truly absolute. She could restrain Lancer of Red and kill the five of them with just a single hand. However, that wasn’t a secret assassination, but an act of battle.

...In other words, there was the danger that the deed could be exposed to her Master and the other Servants. So the issue wasn’t in the means, but rather that it wasn’t something that should be displayed openly for others to see. Therefore, Assassin of Red had reluctantly withdrawn every time she found Lancer in her way.

Even so, after repeating this so many times, she was becoming irritated. Assassin of Red spoke up.

“Just give up already, Lancer. They won’t awaken in time for the coming battle, and you have no obligation to listen to their orders.”

There were unconcealed thorns in her voice. Rider and Archer were easy to understand in comparison; they were both stereotypical heroes. Foolish heroes, who intolerably prided themselves in their strength and skill, carried a great sense of honor and pride, and ran across battlefields.

But—Lancer of Red, Karna, was somehow different from them. Though he should have been a perfect hero in terms of his bloodline, history and everything else about him, he was distinctly unlike the many other heroes Semiramis knew.

“The relationship between a Master and Servant has nothing to do with obligation. It’s a contract and a bond. Assassin, even you are not cooperating with Shirou Kotomine out of mere obligation.”

"Of course not. He and I are joined together by the contract between Master and Servant. However, Lancer. Your Master is Shirou, not that man there."

Assassin said that and pointed at the man who Lancer of Red should have respected as his Master.

She provoked him with a scorn-filled laugh that no normal hero would be able to endure without flaring up. But Lancer didn't show any signs of anger at her smile and nodded with an attitude that, rather than solemn, was simply too serious and honest.

"Your words are certainly correct, Assassin. The only ones who are truly joined together as Master and Servant within our camp are you and your Master. Your Master uses you and you use your Master. But there is service and trust in that relationship. You can't betray him; it's probably the best you can do to simply imagine doing so."

" _ "

Assassin became speechless at Lancer's words. Just now, hadn't this Heroic Spirit pointed out [something] deep inside her far too smoothly?

After a short silence, Assassin of Red slowly opened her mouth.

"...What, did you, just say?"

"Nothing really. You can't betray your Master and he trusts you as well, so I was merely complimenting you for being the ideal Master and Servant pair."

Assassin of Red glared at Lancer. "How unexpected," Lancer said as he tilted his head in puzzlement. He had certainly been praising her. He had *intended* to praise her. However...

"What... ridiculous nonsense are you saying?"

"It's not ridiculous. You two are ideal as Master and Servant. Your Master won't betray you either. Not because you will repay betrayal with the greatest punishment, but because he understands that it's important not to betray each other as the best possible means."

—He wouldn't betray her.

She couldn't help but feel that those words were something very precious.

Ignoring Assassin's turmoil, Lancer spoke further.

"I won't tell you to agree, but at least understand, Assassin. Survival of the fittest is the providence of this world — however, we are not beasts. There should be some kind of humanity which covers our instincts. And that humanity takes the form of various different ethics... My ethics demand that I not betray my Master. That is *who I am*."

Lancer said that while knowing full well about Assassin of Red's seemingly useless paranoia and Archer of Red's overly cold logic.

"I will protect them here. That's all I have to say."

The illusion of Assassin staggered, showing how deeply shocked her true self sitting on the throne was.

"...I, see. Fine, do as you wish."

"Thank you, Assassin."

Just before her illusionary phantom disappeared, she turned back to Lancer and asked a question.

"—Hey, do you really think I won't betray my Master?"

"...That's a foolish question. Assassin, are you such a paranoid monomaniac that you would want to kill the person you adore?"

At those words, the illusionary Assassin lost her composure and became greatly flustered just before vanishing from the room.

Lancer of Red gave a murmur of relief. Assassin probably wouldn't aim to kill these five after this.

"—It seems my duty is finished. Master, I was unable to exchange a single word with you, but I wish you good fortune."

"You listening? The trick to making good coffee is..."

Nodding to his former Master who was staring at empty air and talking to an imaginary person, Lancer went into spiritual form and vanished from the room.

Meanwhile, Assassin was dumfounded as she sat alone on her throne.

—You can't betray him; it's probably the best you can do to simply imagine doing so.

What thoughtless words. Finally, an emotion like anger began boiling up within her.

She seethed so much that her blood was boiling.

"I can't betray him? Me, Semiramis—?"

Ridiculous. The reason she didn't betray him was only because their objectives aligned. He would save humanity, and she would become the one who controlled humanity after they were granted salvation.

The one to assume the throne would be her alone. The rest were all her "livestock". It wasn't like she would oppress them; she would merely control and rule them. That would be easily granted once she obtained a physical body, and as long as the Greater Grail was within these Hanging Gardens, there was no need to worry about running out of prana either.

All that was left was to simply settle things with the Black camp. Once everything was over, it would be more than possible for her to betray her Master.

Don't make me laugh, Lancer. I can betray him. I merely have no need to betray him.

In fact, she could betray him even right now. It would be simple for her to erase his will, steal his rights as a Master and make him her puppet.

That's right. There's no need for me to follow along with that boy's whims. I can steal everything from him. Just like always, just like I've done countless times, I'll make everything of his mine using my words, fingertips and sweet poison —

She imagined it. His face when he was betrayed. After turning shocked like an idiot and gradually understanding the truth, his face would twist hideously in anger. And then, he would cry and scream in sorrow —

"...No, that's wrong. He wouldn't show sorrow like that."

Most likely, he would just widen his eyes slightly in surprise. And then, her Master—would surely smile.

It didn't work out. My sixty years of effort came to nothing.

And yet, he wouldn't lament. Because Shirou Kotomine had already abandoned any regrets four hundred years ago. From the moment he forgave everything and swore to save everyone, he threw away everything he had.

He wouldn't become angry at her betrayal. He would simply deal with it and take appropriate measures.

That was a sad way of life. Just as scorn was unavoidable with betrayal, he was scorned each time he was betrayed and had the things he built trampled down. But, no matter how many times it repeated, he would simply rebuild again from the beginning.

When he was betrayed, he wouldn't seem like the betrayed one at all. Having already discarded all despair, he would simply leave behind the betrayer and move forward.

Assassin, who stabbed others from behind, could never catch up with him.

She could only watch his back as he left.

She felt no emotions like sadness or frustration—but rather a vague loneliness like a wispy cloud.

CHAPTER 1 END



Chapter 2

The Masters and Servants of the Black Camp had once more gathered in the castle's conference room.

After much trouble, Assassin of Black had been taken down, thereby getting rid of any lingering worries before they departed. There would be no problem leaving the other Yggdmillennia clan members to deal with and cover up the injuries from the fog. The fact that the children that Assassin had controlled were all alive and well was a silver lining within it all.

"We'll leave Trifas and head to the capital Bucharest at noon tomorrow. Once there, we'll board an airplane and commence our air-raid against the Hanging Gardens."

—So Fiore's declaration shouldn't have been surprising, but...

"Nee-san. An air-raid means attacking the ground from the air, so I don't think that phrasing applies in this case, strictly speaking."

"Muh. I-It doesn't matter. Caules, make sure you finish all your preparations in time."

"Well, I will, but are we really going by air? Using a normal plane?"

Fiore nodded with a frown.

"After all, no matter what plans we think up, it's impossible to avoid being intercepted by the enemy, right? In that case, it's more efficient to go there using the cheapest method and disguising ourselves as much as possible."

“Hey, hey! The airplane! I can pilot the airplane!”

Rider of Black enthusiastically raised his hand—but Fiore shook her head.

“We’ll have a golem pilot the plane. We can’t have a Servant’s hands occupied with piloting it in the middle of battle.”

“But I have a rank of A+ in my Riding skill! I wanted to show off how I can ride anything and not just my Hippogriff, you know!?”

“Ufufu. Such a shameful motive gives me all the more reason to say no... Besides, if you’re not riding your Hippogriff when things turn bad, you won’t be able to protect you Master, right?”

“Ugh, that’s true, but...”

“The members going to the Hanging Gardens are Archer of Black, Rider of Black, Ruler, the boy who can become Saber of Black... and me as well.”

“But Master—”

Archer of Black tried to object, but Fiore coldly refused.

“We’ve gone over this, Archer. I also have my pride as the head of Yggdmillennia. And we can’t risk the possibility of my prana being cut off from you in the midst of battle either.”

Archer silently withdrew his protest. He appeared to understand from Fiore’s obstinate expression that his words wouldn’t change her mind. Fiore continued speaking to persuade them everyone else as well.

“...I must accompany you all in case the worst should happen. I have a duty as the head of Yggdmillennia. Additionally, unlike a normal Holy Grail War, fourteen Servants were summoned this time. It’s possible that the Path between Master and Servant is weakened as a result. It’s not a good idea to become separated from each other.”

In a Holy Grail War, the relationship between Master and Servant was, logically, the same as between magus and familiar. There existed a Line connecting the familiar and magus, which was essentially unaffected by distance.

However, the prana channel between Master and Servant was a pseudo-version of this Line that was created during the summoning. Prana flowed across the Line, but Fiore conjectured that it might become cut off if they became too distanced from each other. Even more so if they left Romania, the base of Yggdmillennia's magecraft.

In other words, it would be the same as if the Master didn't exist for the Servant. Unless they had the skill [Independent Action], Servants wouldn't be able to last even a day in that condition.

"Nee-san, me too—"

Fiore quickly spoke up to cut Caules off.

"Caules. You must remain here... You are the successor of the Forvedge family. I can't allow you to be exposed to danger."

"—That's wrong."

When Caules replied like that, Fiore glared at him with cold eyes. Her eyes weren't those of his older sister, but of a magus.

But, though that would normally be enough to make him withdraw his opinion, Caules glared right back at her without retreating a single step.

"...Caules. We will talk about this later."

As if to shake off the bad atmosphere hanging over the conference, Ruler spoke up to ask a question.

"An airplane, huh...? I don't think there's anything wrong with it in terms of speed, but have you thought up any countermeasures against making us an easy target for the enemy when we approach them?"

Fiore frowned and pressed a hand to her head as if very troubled.

"We have come up with three tentative measures. If you'll all listen, then—"

Fiore laid out the full details of the strategy she had refined together with Archer. Among the three measures she had devised, two of them were extremely valid and effective plans that anyone could think of.

The problem was the last one.

‘It’s a bit forceful, but it’s not a bad idea’ —so judged Rider of Black. Sieg also agreed to it, saying, ‘It will slightly raise our chances of reaching the Hanging Gardens.’ When Archer of Black heard the idea, he was also satisfied, saying, ‘It will reduce our disadvantage in the air even if only by a little bit.’

And lastly, Ruler, the only one among them who understood the common sense of regular society, became pale-faced when she heard it.

“...Ruler, is something wrong?”

Fiore tilted her head and asked her curiously. Ruler breathed out a sigh and shook her head.

“No, it’s nothing. I just painfully realized the gulf that lies between magi and normal humans.”

Even with this plan, though, they would only be able to get close to Assassin’s enormous Noble Phantasm, the **Hanging Gardens of Babylon**.

“It still isn’t enough. I’d like at least one more countermeasure to have in play.”

Sieg groaned at the difficulty of what Fiore asked.

In the first place, the preconditions were harsh. An impregnable floating fortress, along with Atalanta, Karna, Achilles and Semiramis—all of them Servants of the strongest rank.

The problem wasn’t a matter of winning or losing, but how to feasibly approach that floating fortress—

Ruler raised her hand first. She cleared her throat, gathering everyone’s attention towards her.

“How about preparing a second airplane loaded with explosives and enhanced through consecration and making it dive and crash into the gardens from a high altitude?”

Ruler, who had run through numerous battlefields, proposed quite an extreme plan.

“...H-How bold.”

Fiore stiffened. Archer of Black exclaimed “Oh!” in admiration and clapped his hands.

“But the Hanging Gardens is an autonomous moving fortress. It’s most likely Assassin of Red’s greatest and most prized mystery. Even if you consecrate them, I have doubts about how much damage mere explosives will be able to do...”

“However, if we don’t manage to damage it at least a little, even infiltrating the gardens will be impossible. The situation is far different from the last battle. This time, they’ll definitely counterattack with all their might.”

Ruler was correct. Back when they were stealing the Greater Grail, the situation hadn’t allowed the Red camp to ambush the enemy Servants while the Hanging Gardens was so close to the surface. In the first place, Shirou had intentionally led the Black Servants and Ruler into the Gardens back then.

This time would be different. The Red camp would move to eliminate the Black camp with all their might.

“Even if we use that plan, it still isn’t enough.”

After Archer of Black stated that, the gathered Servants, Masters and even the homunculi standing by for orders exchanged various ideas, but none of them were worth pursuing.

“Not a plane, but strategic bombing aircraft... Hmm, either way, we need a weapon with great destructive power... missiles... or a bunker-buster... or, though the name is disrespectful, perhaps the [Rods of God]¹...”

Fiore and most of the others couldn’t understand even half of the things that Ruler murmured. Only Gordes trembled in fear, saying, “Does this holy woman intend to end the world...?”

“Hmm? In that case, how about this homun—”

1. Rods of God: the nickname for kinetic bombardment, which basically involves launching a projectile down from orbit and using the kinetic energy from the drop to deliver a devastating strike to the surface even without any explosives.

The instant Caules tried to point at the homunculus Sieg after suddenly thinking of something, Ruler glared at him. Caules frantically hid his hand.

Sieg then raised his own hand and spoke up.

“I really don’t mind using my Noble Phantasm as Saber of Black... But, if I end up clashing against the Hanging Gardens’ defense functions—in other words, against Assassin of Red’s spells, the Gardens will likely survive the attack even if I don’t lose outright.”

Sieg could accurately calculate the power of that spell attack which Ruler blocked with her holy flag. If that was all there was, he was confident that he could overwhelm and beat it with Saber of Black’s **Balmung**.

However, they had learned from Rider of Black that the Hanging Gardens had eleven interception spells prepared and ready for Assassin of Red to fire at any time. If the spell that Ruler had blocked was a ‘one’, then it was basically multiplied by eleven when fired in combination.

Even then, Sieg probably wouldn’t lose, but he wasn’t confident that he could defeat it either. The odds were likely that it would turn into a contest of power—clashing against each other with all their might and merely resulting in both of them exhausting themselves.

And, though the Red camp could afford it, that was the worst possible outcome for the Black camp.

“Turning it into a contest of power is the same as wasting Saber of Black’s power. That’s a very poor plan.”

Archer of Black stated that, and Ruler agreed. Sieg also wanted him to use his power as little as possible. But it was also true that he wanted to help them reach the Hanging Gardens if his power was necessary.

If the odds were high that it would end up being a contest of power, then it couldn’t be helped.

There were no holes in their plan itself. There weren’t, but—in order to reach the Gardens, they had to get through Lancer, Rider and Archer of Red’s interception attacks. The Gardens also had its own defences, so taking that into account—

“...As I thought, the odds of us surviving are low.”

At Sieg's intuitive words, a gloomy silence enveloped the conference room. Just as Sieg said, even with all their plans, the odds of success were low. A plane was, in the end, merely a flying lump of metal. It would be easily torn apart by any attack from Archer's bow, Lancer's spear or Rider's chariot.

“—That's true. The fact that I'm so inept that I can only think of something like this is the problem. However, there aren't many methods for us to oppose the Hanging Gardens.”

Though it was called a 'garden', it was already on the level of a fortress. Even the Fortress of Millennia, which had required hundreds of years to build, was but a fragile balloon in comparison.

Assassin of Red—Semiramis. The legendary empress born from the goddess Derketo and a human man. Famed for her peerless beauty after she grew up, she was sometimes regarded as an incarnation of the goddess Ishtar.

She could probably put up a good match against Lancer of Red, Karna, with the strength of her mysteries. And then there was her Noble Phantasm, the Hanging Gardens. Even if it was a temporary miracle that would only last for the duration of the Great Holy Grail War, airplanes, which were the crystallization of modern science and technology, were nothing when compared to it.

“It's fine, it's fine! At the very least, I can protect Master and one other person!”

In order to break the gloomy atmosphere, Rider of Black spoke up in a bright voice. His words weren't a simple show of courage. They were full of confidence, truly the kind of words that only a hero could shout.

“You mean with your Hippogriff?”

“Yeah! I couldn't display its special ability in the previous battle, but this time I'll use it for sure! After all, you're my Master now! Ahaha.”

Rider laughed while slapping Sieg's back repeatedly. Ruler felt the atmosphere in the conference room flip around and become half-amazed, yet also brighter. Those words were quite carefree, but they were sincere as well. Rider hadn't tried to forcibly cheer them up; he was a warrior who truly thought that way from the bottom of his heart. That was enough for the atmosphere to change.

“And besides, I’m completely impervious to magecraft! I have a tome that can counter any kind of spell!”

After all, Rider of Black had an abundance of reliable Noble Phantasms to make up for his own weak abilities.

“Well, I did forget its true name, so it’s can’t display its real ability, though.”

Yes, even if he had forgotten the Noble Phantasm’s name and couldn’t activate its full power — —

“No, please wait a second, Rider. What did you just say?”

Everyone’s gazes, including Sieg, converged on Rider of Black. Rider tilted his head with a puzzled expression —

“Eh, like I said, I have a Noble Phantasm tome. I’m really troubled since I’ve forgotten its true name.”

Looking completely untroubled in his demeanor, Rider of Black spoke cheerfully.

—Rider of Black took out a book which suddenly materialized of nowhere and placed it on the conference room’s table with a thud. All the magi of the group, including Fiore, Caules and Gordes, gulped at the sight of it.

“This is Astolfo’s Noble Phantasm...”

Unlike Rider’s Hippogriff or lance, which had little to do with magecraft, a grimoire like this was a familiar sight to them.

And because they were familiar with grimoires, they could comprehend the enormous magical power hidden within this tome.

“...I see. So the reason your Magic Resistance is only one rank below mine is because you have this.”

Ruler nodded in understanding. She had certainly thought it was strange. The Magic Resistance of the Rider class was usually low-ranked, and she had never heard any legend of Astolfo originally having such a trait either.

But there was a legend about a tome that could destroy all spells, which had been given to Astolfo by a good witch. Indeed, if he always had this in his possession, he wouldn't be harmed by most spells.

"Yeah, it really is convenient. After all, just possessing it protects me from spells."

"...Umm, Rider. May I ask something?"

While taking a deep breath, Fiore spoke up.

"This tome can activate its true abilities by speaking its true name. According to legend, this is a grimoire that can destroy all spells, right? ...And you forgot its true name?"

"No, actually, it's just on the tip of my tongue—"

"Remember it, please remember it! We might be able to take down the Hanging Gardens if you do!"

Fiore shook Rider's shoulders with her Bronze-Link Manipulators.

"Wah, wah, wawah, wawawah! Wait, wait! I'll remember! I'll remember it! No, actually, I just remember it! Really, really!"

"Truly!?"

Not only Fiore, but even Archer and Ruler got excited and pressed near him all at once. Even someone like Rider could feel the pressure here, and he took a step back while sweating.

"Err. Umm. What I remembered isn't its true name, but the requirement for me to remember it, though..."

"Requirement...?"

"Yeah. The requirement is—*a moonless night*. If it's on a day when there's no moon, I can definitely invoke this grimoire's true name."

Everyone exchanged glances at those words.

“Moonless—in other words, a new moon, huh?”

Fiore wondered aloud, and her Servant Archer of Black voiced his agreement.

“The moon has been treated as a guide of madness since ancient times. If we consider that the reason that Rider’s reason evaporates is due to madness, then it’s only on a night when the moon his hidden that Rider’s reason returns.”

“The next new moon is... five days from now. What will you do, Yggdmillennia?”

Sieg asked the question. In truth, their plan was to depart tomorrow, but if they waited until the next new moon, Rider would be able to activate his Noble Phantasm.

The longer they waited, the farther the Hanging Gardens would get from them. If the Red Camp managed to leave Romania’s borders, the ownership of the Greater Grail would become a contested issue. Even if they managed to take back the Greater Grail outside of Romania, it would be considerably difficult to reconnect it to the land’s leylines since it would be outside the territory that served as the base of Yggdmillennia’s power.

The head of Yggdmillennia, Darnic, had once used the power of Nazi Germany in order to transport the Greater Grail, but the clan didn’t have any such power or connections now.

Yggdmillennia’s level of influence was completely different inside and outside of Romania. If they were within Yggdmillennia’s territory, they might be able to gather the survivors of their clan and, if necessary, utilize Romania’s government to take the Greater Grail back to the Fortress of Millennia.

But, once they took a single step outside of the country, Yggdmillennia’s ‘power’ was weak. It would be impossible for them to transport the Greater Grail back. And it wasn’t like the Association of Magi had given up on the Greater Grail after losing in the Great Holy Grail War.

In other words—even if they won this war, the Greater Grail wouldn’t return to Yggdmillennia’s hands.

But, if they didn’t wait five days, they would have to shoulder excessive

risk in order to get back the Greater Grail.

Fiore was pressed into making a decision.

...As a magus, she should go after the Greater Grail even if it meant ignoring Rider of Black's Noble Phantasm.

To reach the Root. To make Yggdmillennia's power known to the world. For the sake of those objectives, activating the Greater Grail was absolutely necessary.

What would happen if they let the Greater Grail fall out of their grasp without resistance? It would mean the end of Yggdmillennia. At the very least, letting the Greater Grail be stolen would almost certainly mean the end of her life as a magus.

As the head of Yggdmillennia, that alone was—

"...Sorry. Please let me talk with Nee-san for a while. Sieg and all the Servants, please go back to your rooms for tonight and rest. We'll come to a decision by tomorrow."

Perhaps sensing that Fiore's thoughts were in a deadlock, Caules raised his hand and spoke up. Gordes merely said, "This isn't an issue that I have any say in anyway," and he left before any of the others.

Rider of Black seemed like he wanted to say something to the Forvedge siblings, but Sieg and Ruler grabbed his shoulders and forcibly pulled him out of the room.

Lastly, Archer of Black looked at the conflicted Fiore—and then looked at Caules. Caules nodded silently. Seeing that, Archer smiled in relief, and silently left the room.

And then, only the two siblings were left in the conference room.

Fiore moved her wheelchair to look at the pitch-black darkness outside the window—as if she were trying to run away.

"Now then. Nee-san, what will we do?"

That cold tone was completely unlike the normal Caules; it was the voice of a magus. Fiore replied while still facing the window.

"We must shoulder the greater risks. We—Yggdmillennia must take back the Greater Grail through any means pos—"

"I think this is a watershed moment."

Without waiting for her to finish speaking, Caules cut in and said that.

"Watershed... what do you mean?"

"This is a turning point deciding whether you'll become a magus or a human, Nee-chan²."

— Those words sent a horrible chill down Fiore's back.

"...What are you talking about?"

"Based on the movements of the Greater Grail that we heard from Ruler, the Red camp is definitely heading towards the Black Sea. I have no idea where they intend to go from there. Maybe they'll go north or south, or maybe they're heading somewhere specific—in any case, if we don't catch up with them by tomorrow, the Greater Grail will fall out of all of our hands."

"I know that."

"Darnic Prestone Yggdmillennia devoted everything for the sake of this rebellion. He put our blood, our magic power, our fortune and property, everything last thing we have on the table. If we lose here, everything will come to nothing. Even if we wait five days and win with better chances, *it will all come to nothing.*"

"I know that."

"So if we want the Greater Grail, we have to leave by tomorrow."

"Like I said, I know all that! Caules, what are you trying to say!?"

Irritated, Fiore turned around and glared at Caules—and her anger immediately vanished like mist.

Caules' eyes were as dark as the depths of the deep sea.

"However, that is the choice of a magus."

"...Of a magus?"

That was obvious. That was the premise behind everything. Fiore Forvedge Yggdmillennia was a magus, after all.

2. Here, Caules has switched from calling Fiore "Nee-san" to "Nee-chan", showing he is talking to her more familiarly.

"The Greater Grail can't be allowed to be used by someone evil. That's why we have to win. For the sake of that, we'll raise our odds of winning even the slightest bit. We have to lower the risk and increase our chances... even if it means we can't obtain the Greater Grail."

Caules calmly said that.

"I won't change my mind. Yggdmillennia—"

"Who cares about Yggdmillennia? Forget the fact that you're the head of our family too. Nee-chan, the issue here is whether or not you'll continue to be a magus."

Understanding the meaning of those words, Fiore turned pale and moved back from Caules. Her anger had disappeared, and in its stead, she felt fear, looking at her brother as if he had become a monster.

"...Are you telling me to stop being a magus?"

"That's something for you to decide, Nee-chan."

"The answer is obvious. I—"

I will continue being a magus. I must continue being a magus. After all, our parents and relatives expect that of me, and I have to unify our clan. I also have to use the Greater Grail to grant my wish to have my legs healed —

"...Do you remember that dog?"

—Fiore's breathing halted. Memories that should have sunk to the bottom of her consciousness suddenly rose to the surface.

The peeled skin of the dog. Its cries of pain. Its black eyes that seemed to ask "Why?" —

Just remembering it made her feel like vomiting.

"...I remember. I could never forget it."

Tightly gripping the armrests of her wheelchair, Fiore replied as if spitting out blood. She had thought about forgetting it time and time again. And each time, she had sworn not to forget and continued to endure the flashbacks.

"I see... In that case, you really aren't suited to be a magus, Nee-chan. It would have better if you *just forgot it*."

Memories of the past were important.

If it was for the sake of living as a magus, then she should hold onto them. But Fiore's memories were merely a form of trauma that gave her no benefit. Even if it raised her chances of communicating with low-level spirits within her specialty magecraft, what good would it do? Her success was natural in the first place, and even if she failed a spell, she could think of a hundred ways of dealing with it. As someone trained thoroughly as a magus, she could reject any trivial spiritual possession just by using her Magic Circuits.

...That's why memories had no value for her. If a memory was so sad, painful and unpleasant that it blinded her, she didn't have any problem with forgetting it.

—Except for one. The memory of those peaceful days spent with that dog.

"There's no way I could forget."

"Why?"

Caules' voice was calm as he asked that. Fiore forgot about resisting, and simply answered honestly.

"Because, if I forget that little one, where else would he have to go?"

In this world, the only ones who remembered that dog—were probably only herself and her brother.

If she forgot him, that dog would disappear in that instant. The certain awareness that 'he had existed' would disappear.

People make graves in order not to forget the dead. Each time they saw the graves, they recalled those bygone days.

Proving that '*those people were alive in the past*' was just as important as proving '*I'm alive in the present*'.

That's why, if she forgot that dog...

He would have nowhere to go—

“Isn’t that sentiment completely opposed to the reasoning of magi? ... That’s why you’re not cut out to be a magus, Nee-chan.”

Hearing those words, Fiore stopped breathing for an instant—and then she nodded.

“...You’re right. I’m not cut out for it. I might have hesitated over it a little too much.”

She should have forgotten it. But even if she didn’t forget it, it didn’t impede her that much. She had used her talent to continue dodging the issue between her detestable sentimentality and her life as a magus.

But that was also at an end. Her childhood was long past, and she had to decide whether to take the path forward or backward now.

...She should go forward. She should continue as a magus.

That was the correct choice. That was unmistakably the logical decision.

Ah, but—

She had made a grave for that dog. She didn’t know whether it had been worn away by the all rain and wind since then. But still, she and her brother had made a grave.

She had grieved for that dog and felt sad over his death. She didn’t have the courage to erase those feelings and call herself a magus with a calm face.

Yes, that’s right. She had *no courage*. Cowardly, timid, always worrying and fretting; that was her true self.

Something warm filled her heart.

She thought herself foolish and weak, not for being unable to keep moving forward, but for being unable to change the part of her that didn’t want to ever forget that dog—but even so, she didn’t regret it.

“—I can’t go forward anymore.”

“...I see. Yeah, I think that’s for the best, Nee-chan.”

She was at her limit.

Hearing Caules’ words, Fiore bent forward and began to sob.

Fiore Forvedge Yggdmillennia decided to quit. Not the Great Holy Grail War, but her life as a magus.

“...We'll wait five days. If Rider can utilize that tome's true power, it will decrease the risk of us getting shot down when we attack.”

“I see. Then Nee-chan, you'll stand behind here—”

As Caules patted his chest in relief, Fiore tilted her head curiously and interrupted him.

“What are you talking about? Of course not. Naturally, I'll also be going.”

“Huh!? Didn't you quit!?”

“Caules, what on earth are you talking about?”

As if her tears just now were a lie, she spoke to her brother with a composed expression.

“I've certainly quit being Fiore Forvedge Yggdmillennia the magus. But I still have a separate duty as someone chosen as a Master in the Great Holy Grail War.”

“Ugh. That's...”

Caules groaned. Just as she said, regardless of whether or not she was a magus now, she still had her responsibility as a Master.

Furthermore, Archer of Black was still alive and required prana.

And it wasn't like she could give up on the Great Holy Grail War here. She had to fight, not as a magus, but because of her pride as a Master.

“You listening, Caules? I will also ride the plane. You will remain here with Gordes-ojisama. I will entrust everything to you both should the worst case scenario occur.”

“...No, I'll go. I'll go too. I'm the same as you. I also have a duty as a Master.”

That's right, Caules was still a Master. Though only to a small extent, he was supplying prana for Archer of Black. But that was simply as a backup. In reality, he was merely a Master that had already dropped out of the Great Holy Grail War.

“Even though Berserker is gone?”

When Fiore asked that sadly, Caules looked straight at Fiore and responded.

“Even if Berserker is gone, even if all my Command Spells have vanished, I’m still a Master. And above all, I’m an Yggdmillennia magus. Since I bear that duty, I’ll also go.”

Fiore sucked in a surprised breath when she heard those words.

An Yggdmillennia magus—she understood what those words meant. They were a proclamation of their separation, and a kind of decisive declaration.

For a short while, the two of them fell into silence.

“.....I see. You’re going *that way*, Caules.”

Fiore whispered in a lonely manner, and Caules shrugged calmly.

“I myself don’t care either way. But well, if Nee-chan is going over to *that side*, I should stay on this side.”

That wasn’t Caules’ own desire. He was merely acting in accordance with Fiore’s actions. But he had no regrets over it.

In the first place, he had always led an aimless life. He was a completely half-hearted person who didn’t care whether he was a human or a magus either way. If that could help his sister settle her own life—well, that was fine with me.

“You won’t come with me...?”

“Is there a need for me to go with you?”

Caules unhesitatingly rebuked Fiore’s imploring words. *It’s better like this*, thought Caules. Fiore would be lonely and lament that he was no longer by her side. But it was still a parting that she would eventually recover from.

She had decided the path she would follow. There was no way to know what lay ahead of her. But she had decided.

She would lose many things—that was only natural, since she was throwing away the glory and life of a magus. Even so—Fiore wanted to follow that path.

It wasn't about whether it was right or not. It was a decision wrapped in regret.

“...I'll be lonely.”

“I wonder about that. We might both end up dying in five days.”

“—Yeah. Naturally, such a future is also possible.”

Perhaps because she had been absentminded, she had completely forgotten it was far more likely they wouldn't live to see the future—and when she realized that, Fiore involuntarily laughed.

Caules also started laughing with her, and from there on, their faces twisted in mirth as they convulsed with laughter.

Wiping tears from his eyes, Caules spoke.

“It's the final battle. Let's make sure to go all out, Nee-chan.”

“It's all right. I—have Archer to protect me, after all,” Fiore replied.

The sky was filled with dazzling stars.

Though the occasionally blowing wind was cold, it wasn't so bad that it made the body shiver. Seen from the lookout of the Fortress of Millennia, Trifas looked to have finally regained its peace.

Many Yggdmillennia magi were running around, using hypnosis on the people to suppress the panic, acting as doctors to give medical treatment, and acting as policemen to publically announce what happened as a spontaneous outbreak of poison gas. Fiore, who was the acting clan head, had immediately negotiated with the government to bring the state of emergency to a close. Apparently, it had also been announced that the serial killings were resolved.

As he was looking up at the stars, Archer of Black felt a strange sense of disconnection. It wasn't that anything abnormal had occurred, but

rather that a certain thought had suddenly come to mind.

“—The stars haven’t changed even after more than two millennia, huh?”

He had thought that the sky he saw in Greece in the past and the sky he saw now in Trifas would be different, but it hadn’t changed that much.

The lives of humans have changed. History continues to advance. But the way the world works hasn’t changed that much, thought Archer.

People fight, love, think and give directions—Those known as kings may have entirely died out, but the act of ruling itself hadn’t changed that much from when Archer was alive.

...It can’t be helped, he thought.

People could accumulate wisdom and convey knowledge down the generations. But that didn’t mean that their inner instincts changed as well.

If that part of them changed, they would no longer be human, but something else entirely.

Even so—should people aim to become something beyond human?

“...Ridiculous.”

That whisper he unconsciously muttered was heard by someone behind him.

“Archer?”

Archer turned around at the sound of that clear voice.

“Ah, Sieg. What is it?”

He looked behind Sieg for the figures of Rider or Ruler, who were the first and second most likely people to be with him. Noticing Archer’s gaze, Sieg spoke up in a slightly miffed tone.

“The two of them are speaking with your Master. I was just told to bring you a message.”

“A message?”

"Yes... It seems we'll be departing in five days. You should talk with your Master later to hear the full details."

"—Is that so?"

Archer understood the meaning of those words very well. It meant that his Master, who was both a magus and a normal human, had decided to live as a normal human.

But despite everything, she had chosen that. Though she would lose many things, she had still chosen that path.

No matter how normal they might be, everyone was pressed to make a choice eventually. The choice of what path to take in their life.

There were exceedingly few people who didn't regret or waver. But Archer knew that never wavering was not necessarily correct.

No, he wouldn't mind even if she wavered and made a mistake.

"Archer. I have a question to ask of you with your wisdom."

Archer was a bit surprised to find that Sieg was still there, since he thought the homunculus would leave right away after delivering the message.

"Yes, what is it?"

Sieg's handsome, doll-like face was tinged with faint distress.

"I don't understand."

His whisper was faint beneath the starry sky.

"What don't you understand?"

"...Assassin of Black showed me something."

Sieg spoke of what he had seen.

There were those who exploited and those who were exploited. And at the end of it all were pure lives that were merely plucked away.

It was complete and perfect as a system; no one was in the wrong, and there was no justice to be found anywhere.

The spectacle he had witnessed was one form of hell.

“It’s true that that might not be all there is to humans... But then, I realized. If humans continue to sacrifice the few for *the sake of the whole*, simply because it’s not very visible... the world might not be that different from that hell.”

With those faltering words, Sieg denounced the world.

The world isn’t beautiful. The world is ugly. Those words—contained a grain of truth.

“...Of course, I don’t know anything about the world. So these thoughts of mine might be absurd to you.”

He said that in a somewhat sulky manner. Archer found that slightly charming.

Now then... it would be simple for Archer to reject what Sieg had said, and putting it into words would be easy for him as well. He could destroy Sieg’s conclusion in just ten words, and with a hundred he could easily persuade him otherwise. After all, Sieg himself wanted to deny his own conclusion. He wanted to believe in Ruler’s words that ‘The world is beautiful’.

But Archer rejected that option.

“...Perhaps so. Sieg, I walked on the earth more than two thousand years ago. People have multiplied since then. They have continued to overcome disasters and battles and to prosper. In the Earth’s long history, the only race to have prospered this much is humanity. But that doesn’t mean that humanity has changed much over those two thousand years. They haven’t changed in the most fundamental sense.”

Sieg looked at Archer in surprise. Archer shook his head as if to say how unbearable it all was.

“I have raised and trained less than a hundred humans. Many of them reached the level where they were called heroes. Of course, that was due to their individual resourcefulness and efforts. I merely gave them a push to support them, but—”

Even so, he felt pride in the pupils he had taught.

Asclepius, who became revered as a god of medicine; the famous hero Heracles; Castor; and the hero who had been summoned as Rider of Red, Achilles. Both those who left their names in history and those who remained buried in anonymity were splendid humans, one and all.

“Even though there were once such great heroes, the world still hasn’t changed. That’s only natural. No human can change their basic instincts.”

No matter how much people trained themselves, there was no human who never felt hunger in their life. If such a feat were achieved, it would probably be some kind of curse.

Humans possessed both reason and instinct. It was impossible to live by reason alone, and living by instinct alone merely made one a beast.

Reason has developed due to the advancement of knowledge. Techniques to restrain instincts have also increased. But—it was impossible to completely negate them.

“However, everything is washed away before the large river of history. It can’t be helped. It can’t be helped, but... As I stand here again in the world two thousand years later, I wonder if there was any meaning in my life. I think such foolish thoughts.”

It truly was foolish.

Archer of Black immediately denied the thoughts that welled up in him. There was no such as a life that had meaning in this world. And there shouldn’t be.

Because your life’s meaning was something that you had to create yourself by moving forward.

“...There is meaning in it. You left your name in history. Your life’s brilliance became part of the stars in the sky and the name of your constellation remains even two thousand years later. I find that enviable.”

The way Sieg seemed to pout as he murmured that was quite amusing to Archer.

“Thank you, Sieg. Now then, I can’t answer your question. But I will give you one piece of advice, if you’ll allow me. Right now, you don’t know what’s good and what’s bad, but you should think about it while following your heart. Accepting the advice of others is useful, but you mustn’t simply obey it.”

“...In the end, I guess I have to think for myself.”

“Is that troublesome?”

Sieg should his head silently. He never once thought it was troublesome. But he felt like he shouldn’t think so much that he came to a standstill.

“That’s true. Simply thinking will merely make you go around in circles.”

“...So I have to act, huh?”

Archer nodded at Sieg’s words.

“That’s right. Act and decide. Right now, you are a living creature that can step firmly upon this earth with your own two feet.”

“...I understand. Archer, living is quite difficult, isn’t it? If even I’m like this, it must be even harder for heroes like you.”

Archer shook his head in denial of Sieg’s words.

“It’s true that living might be difficult to some extent, but not so much as you imagine... Rather, the place from which you started was much harsher.”

Sieg gained self-consciousness within a prana supply tank. The fact that he thought of breaking out from there in the first place was abnormal.

He might have despaired once he understood his situation. He might have been at a loss over what to do. But even so, he chose to move forward.

...That wasn’t an act that anyone could do. Most heroes possessed power, talent and divine blessings from the moment they were born.

He had none of those. Yet even without them—he was continuing to fight in the cruel situation of the Great Holy Grail War. If humans had possibilities hidden within themselves, then an artificial lifeform that was extremely close to humans—a homunculus might also have infinite possibilities hidden within himself.

“...Not really, I think I was just desperate back then.”

However, it seemed the boy himself wasn’t aware of that.

“As long as you have that desperate urge, I’m sure that your worries will be settled someday.”

“I see... Thank you, Archer.”

Sieg honestly thanked him, and then began walking away with a pondering expression. He seemed to be diligently considering Archer’s advice.

“That’s fine, but please do watch your step.”

“I know... ah.”

As soon as he said that, Sieg stumbled. Hearing a muted cry of “Kyah” at the same time, he saw that he had bumped into Archer’s Master as she passed by.

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine.”

After that brief exchange, Fiore moved out onto the lookout where Archer stood. Since her wheelchair couldn’t ascend the stairs, she was using her **Bronze-Link Manipulators**.

“Did you hear the message from that homunculus?”

“Yes... I heard about how we’ll be leaving in five days.”

Archer of Black understood very well what that meant.

“The Greater Grail will be—”

“Yes, I know. Archer, there are several things I wish to discuss with you. Will you listen?”

“Of course, Master. Shall we go inside?”

“...No, I don’t mind staying here.”

After saying that, Fiore looked up at the sky. Archer looked at her face from the side under the faint illumination of the castle’s lamps—and at the faint traces of tears on her cheeks.

“It might be able to grant my wish, but it will be difficult to take back the Greater Grail itself. It will most likely be retrieved by the Association of Magi.”

Though, even leaving that aside, it was difficult to say whether or not the Greater Grail would be able to grant her wish anyway. The Black camp had no idea what state the Greater Grail was in after being stolen. It probably wasn’t broken, but that was still merely conjecture on their part.

Besides, the enemy was a minor hero of the Far East who had continued to seek the Greater Grail over the course of six decades. Just what on earth was he planning—?

“That is extremely disadvantageous to Yggdmillennia.”

Archer struck at the truth of the matter with a quiet voice. That’s right, if they launched their attack in five days, it would effectively mean defeat for them.

Sooner or later, the other clan members would also find out about this. In that case, Fiore would be completely cornered by them.

“Yes. That’s why I will take responsibility... No, rather, because *I won’t take responsibility*, I will give up magecraft.”

“...”

Silence. Even though he had already understood, Archer uneasily kept silent.

For a magus to give up magecraft—it meant giving up not only their life, but the entirety of their family’s long history as well.

That was unimaginably painful and terrifying. Because she would be destroying something precious that had been gradually accumulated over time.

"Don't look at me like that, Archer... This is fine. I was finally able to understand. Archer, you realized that I was unsuited to be a magus, right?"

"No, that's—"

Fiore's gentle smile didn't allow Archer to lie.

"...I apologize. After I was summoned, I vaguely became aware of it as I talked with you. Master, you possess excellent and unrivaled talent as a magus. Even now, that is without a doubt true."

Archer apologized with a sincere expression. Fiore faintly giggled.

"Thank you. Those words make me very happy. But—I never had any talent as a magus. I wasn't able to think rationally and devote everything to the study of magecraft."

"I think it would have been fine if you were at least only an isolated magus, Master."

In that case, she wouldn't have gotten involved in the Great Holy Grail War, and would never have been installed as the head of Yggdmillennia.

In the first place, magi did not fight out of preference. There were simply battles they had to fight as a result of something they couldn't give up. If she were isolated, the danger of that would have been low. She might have made the best use of her ability as a magus and eventually left her work to the next generation without ever noticing the truth about herself all her life.

But those were all empty assumptions.

Fiore had been born as the eldest child of the Forvedge family and was made to shoulder various expectations as the candidate for the next Yggdmillennia clan head. She would have noticed it herself eventually. Or someone else would have noticed.

That would have likely led to an unstoppable and fatal situation. Just as Caules had said, this was definitely a turning point for her.

"However, though it may be arrogant of me to say—that makes me happy."

"Archer...?"

“You acted not as a magus, but as an individual human towards me. You regarded me not as the deadly weapon known as a Servant, but as a comrade who fights alongside you. No, perhaps it’s precisely because you’re such a soft-hearted person that I was summoned by you.”

Those were extremely unnecessary feelings in a Holy Grail War. She would definitely part with her Servant in the end.

No matter how much they bonded, that alone would not change.

It was a relationship that would eventually end. In that case, it was better to treat each other that way from the start. The Master would treat the Servant as a weapon and the Servant would use the Master as fuel.

Even though it should have been better that way...

“That’s not it at all. I was just afraid of being hated by you, Archer...”

Archer smiled wryly, finding that to be such a human-like answer.

Perhaps noticing it herself, Fiore became shyly embarrassed.

“I’d like to ask one more thing. Archer, are you all right... with fighting Rider of Red?”

“...What do you mean?”

“I saw a dream about you and Achilles. When he was young and you were raising him.”

Fiore spoke of the dream she had seen. The young Achilles had earnestly revered and respected Chiron. And Chiron had also treated him as his own child—and trained him to be a hero.

Family... That truly was the spectacle of a family.

“Archer, Rider was a beloved pupil to you, wasn’t he? I don’t think it’s right for you to fight him...”

She gave a human-like response out of human-like emotion.

She really is a good Master, thought Chiron with a broad smile. But she misunderstood. She wasn’t wrong—but she wasn’t right either.

“Master. It’s true that, just as you say, it might be painful to fight him to some extent. But it also brings me great joy that exceeds that pain.”

"Joy...?"

"Achilles left my tutelage at around the tender age of ten. And just as promised, he acted as a hero, fought as a hero, and remained a hero right until the moment of his death. The fact that I contributed to those great achievements even a little brings me tremendous joy. And—"

Archer gave a bold smile and clenched his fist.

"I can't help thinking. His fists were once small and weak, unable to even hit me, but could he beat me now? Has his formerly clumsy skill with the lance become good enough to face my arrows?"

That was the instinct of a warrior. The selfish and pure desire known as fighting spirit that sprouted in all those who cultivated the art of battle in this world. It was the simple wish to fight someone strong, even if they were family.

"I want to fight Rider of Red... Those are my honest feelings."

"You mean not as a Servant, but as a warrior?"

"...Yes. Of course, it's also true that there's need to eliminate him as a Servant."

"—I see. Hey, Archer. I might be unsuited as a magus, but could it be that you're also unsuited as a Servant?"

Fiore started giggling.

When she saw Archer think over his own words and then nod meekly, her laughter grew even greater.

"...Do you have regrets over giving up magecraft?"

Archer suddenly asked her that. Fiore cast her eyes down with a slightly sad expression and whispered.

"Of course. It feels painful enough to pierce my heart. Magecraft was something precious to me. So much so that giving it up makes me want to cry in pain and regret."

When this conversation ended, Fiore would probably cry.

And when she transferred her Magic Crest to Caules later, she would probably cry again.

She would probably suffer through tearing heartache for a while after the war was over.

“...That’s good, Master.”

Though Archer’s words were extremely inappropriate as a reply, Fiore accepted them.

“...Yes. My life wasn’t a waste. Magecraft was such an important part of my life that I knew joy and the pain of loss from it.”

That was why.

That was why she had to throw it away in order to walk a different path.

She would feel sad and lament over it. But there weren’t many things in life that were held so precious — so she also felt joy over it.

“Thank you, Archer.”

“I didn’t do anything. You chose your path by your own will. And Caules-dono gave you a push from behind.”

Fiore shook her head at those words. If her Servant had been anyone other than Chiron, she would never have been able to make this choice.

It was because this man, who was as gentle and calm as a deep forest, had merely watched over her from behind that she was able to make this choice.

“I’m truly glad that my Servant was you.”

“And having you as my Master was unexpected good fortune for me.”

“Five days from now. Don’t mind me and fight to your heart’s content. That will help in protecting Caules and I.”

They couldn’t break through the obstacles to the Hanging Gardens with just an airplane. Therefore, they had thought up several plans (though there were all brute force strategies).

Having the Master Fiore and the Servant Archer act separately was also one of those plans. The Servant was meant to protect the Master, so Archer’s presence in one place would also expose the location of his Master there.

Therefore, Archer would forget about his Master and act freely.

“Even so, I’ll respond to a summons by Command Spell in an emergency. If something happens, make sure to call me. I may be a failure as a Servant—but I swear upon the stars of Sagittarius that I will protect you.”

Archer took Fiore’s hand and kneeled. Her cheeks turning slightly red, Fiore let Archer kiss the back of her hand.

“Courtesy and etiquette didn’t exist in my era, so forgive me if I’m ill-mannered.”

“Not... at all.”

As she spoke, Fiore laced her hands together as if having accepted something precious.

Their parting was definitely close at hand. Servants were spirits, and even if Chiron were summoned in another Holy Grail War, it wouldn’t be the Archer of Black who was summoned in this Great Holy Grail War.

“Archer, I pray for your victory.”

It was already uncertain what victory or defeat was at this point. But even so, Fiore could only pray and entrust those words to him.

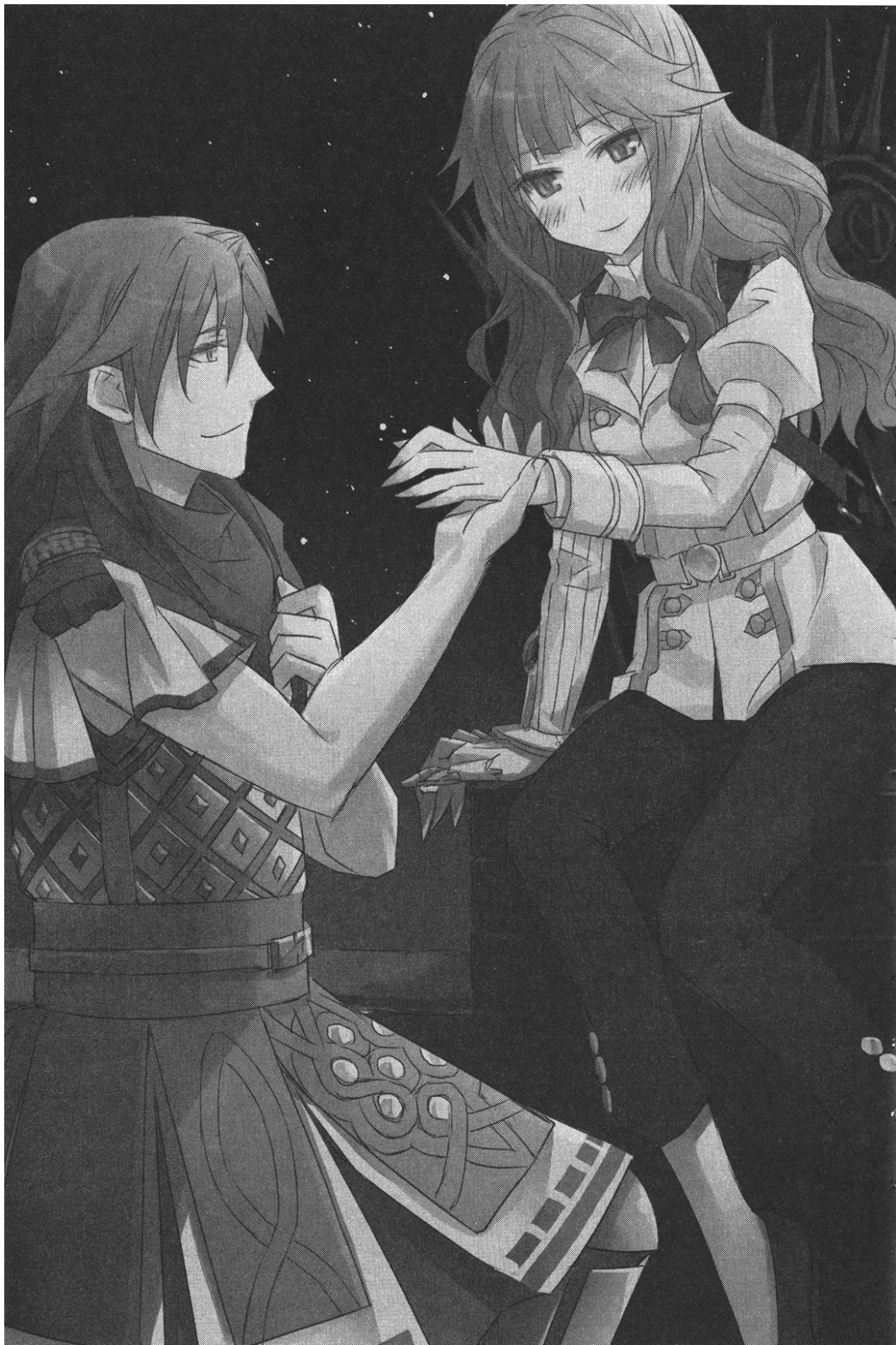
Without saying anything, Archer nodded with a gentle smile.

Sieg and Rider of Black had left Trifas to head to Bucharest. Fiore had furnished a safe house in the city and had asked them to head there first.

...Apparently, she was conducting a ritual that couldn’t be shown to outsiders. Leaving aside Rider of Black who was a Servant, the homunculus would possibly live past the Great Holy Grail War, and so Fiore had requested that he go to a location as far away from the castle as possible.

Sieg didn’t know what kind of ritual it was, but it couldn’t be helped if his presence would be in the way, so he agreed. Fiore also offered to provide him with other homunculi to attend him, but Sieg politely declined.

“I’ll catch up with you soon.”



Ruler said that while clasping her hands together. Her eyes were very serious as she gazed at Sieg. Ruler had to take care of two tasks that Sieg and Fiore had respectively requested of her, so she was staying at the Fortress of Millennia a little while longer. In other words, their group's greatest safety net would be gone from their side.

"Listen, okay? Please don't let Rider cause any trouble. This is not just my request, it's the request of Archer of Black and all of Yggdmillennia as well."

The homunculi behind her nodded in unison.

"...Understood. I'll somehow keep Rider in check."

Sieg clenched his fist as if to show his determination.

"Heeeey, you guys, I am right here, you know? No, you do know, don't you? You're doing it while aware that I'm here. Damn it, are you all trying to pick a fight with me!?"

And Rider of Black, who was watching all this from Sieg's side, lost his temper. But their unease wasn't unwarranted. After all, he was Astolfo, who was famed for his reason evaporating in his legend. He had caused lots of trouble both big and small while here in Trifas as well.

"Now, now, please do calm down. I have faith in you, Rider."

Archer of Black spoke gently and patted Rider's shoulder.

"Archer... *sniff*, you're the only one who believes in me."

Rider's eyes grew moist. Caules spoke up while watching the scene with scornful eyes.

"You were quite troubled over whether you should go to watch Rider, though, Archer."

"Traitor!!"

Rider of Black repeatedly struck his hands against Archer's chest. Sieg came forward to calm him down. While watching the two of them with a gentle gaze, Fiore spoke to Sieg.

"Once we rejoin you, we'll immediately head out towards the Hanging Gardens. Perhaps you should say goodbye to the other homunculi here while you have the chance?"

—Goodbye.

Sieg stiffened at that word as if taken by surprise. What Fiore said was natural, but it was only now that he truly realized that he would have to part with his fellow homunculi.

“All right. Rider, please wait a bit.”

“Sure. Say all your farewells until you’re satisfied.”

“Sieg-kun, partings are a sad thing. Please make sure to engrave them in your memories.”

Sieg nodded at Ruler’s words and then went to bid farewell to the other homunculi.

Most of the homunculi nodded lightly at his words of farewell and replied by tapping his shoulder or patting his head.

Goodbye, do your best, be well, we’ll miss you, don’t die, don’t lose, good luck, take care of your body—All of their words were ordinary, yet precious.

Taking in each of their words one after another, Sieg lastly headed to see the homunculus who basically served as their leader, Tool.

“...You’re going?”

Due to having received great damage during the previous fog incident, she still couldn’t get out of bed. Her consciousness was clear, but she didn’t seem to have yet regained the strength to get up and work. According to Gordes’ diagnosis, she would return to normal in another three days, but—

“Yeah. Whether I win or lose, I probably won’t come back here.”

If he lost, he would probably die. Even if he won or managed to just survive, he wouldn’t return to Trifas.

...He didn’t know what he would do then. Would he distance himself from the evil of humans, or believe in the goodness of humans?

“I see. That’s fine... Go, then. You have a future, after all.”

Tool lightly grasped Sieg's hand and softly struck it. Sieg nodded with a humble expression.

"Truly, thank you very much."

"...Hmm? I think I'm the one who should be saying thanks, though."

Tool tilted her head in confusion at Sieg's words. Sieg sighed—how should he explain it? He was simply glad that she and the others were alive. That was all.

As he was perplexed over how to express it in words, Tool giggled.

"Well, saying farewell like that really is like you... You can live and survive anywhere. You're our hope, after all. You'll surely do something amazing. All the homunculi here believe that."

Something amazing, huh?

Even now, he was aware that he was an "amazing" existence. Even so, that was only a transient miracle. Once the Great Holy Grail War ended, he would probably live an ordinary life like anyone else—

"No. You'll surely do something amazing."

Tool giggled from the bottom of her heart. It soon changed into a spasm-like cough, so he hurriedly gave her water and decided to leave the room.

Even if he gave the same farewell to everyone, there were slight differences among their reactions. Some were sad, some were happy, some were lonely at the prospect of his departure, and some held expectations for his future—

The differences were slight, but that was a result of their individuality, as slight as it might be. Even if they were reared the same way, even if others paid no heed to them, Sieg thought that was something precious.

...He felt reluctant to part with them. But that feeling of reluctance and regret was probably something previous as well.

After bidding farewell to everyone, he joined back up with Rider of Black at the castle gates.

"You finished your farewells?"

“...Yeah, basically.”

“I see. Then let’s go and do our best!”

Rider firmly grasped his hand. That strength of his was reliable and made Sieg happy. And at the same time, he had a thought.

Perhaps someday... no, not ‘perhaps’, I will definitely have to say farewell to Rider as well.

At that time, will I cry or laugh? Or will I not feel anything at all? If possible, I hope I feel something.

After getting on a bus going out of Trifas, Sieg and Rider at last arrived in Bucharest at some point in the evening. They walked through the city following the map they had been given. Along the way, they ended up being surrounded by several men of large build, but fortunately neither of them was injured. They seemed to give up after Rider, using his strength which had once dragged around a giant, bent a nearby light post with his bare hands.

“Then, let’s get going.”

Rider had walked away with a calm face... Since the situation would have turned out much worse if Rider hadn’t displayed his strength like that, Sieg concluded it wasn’t a problem.

The building that had been prepared as their safe house was made of brickwork and was closed off from the outside, the perfect example of a ‘building for insulating prana within its confines’.

Sieg used the password and key he had been given to unlock the safe house’s magically sealed door. It was almost night time. Bucharest was dangerous at night... Though it wasn’t really dangerous for Sieg and Rider themselves, it would be a different matter for anyone who tried to pick a fight with them. It would be fine if it merely ended with a few hits, but in the worst case scenarios, Rider might forget to hold back his strength and break their necks, causing corpses to pile up.

They entered the safe house. The first floor consisted of a living room and kitchen. On the second floor there were bedrooms, with a total of four beds prepared including those for guests. As expected of an Yggdmillennia safe house, the furnishings were quite lavish.

There were high-quality leather sofas, Persian rugs and a tulip-shaped crystal chandelier—and when the energetic Rider immediately broke part of the chandelier upon their arrival, Sieg decided to pretend he didn't see anything.

There was nothing here to serve as a magus' workshop, like a basement or attic room. However, when he paid careful attention to the interior walls, he could tell that there were several alarm spells prepared. It appeared to be a spell that would link with the beds and forcefully wake them up the moment the walls were destroyed or some act of magecraft was detected in the surrounding area.

There was food in the refrigerator, so they decided to not go out of the house any further today. As usual, Rider passed the time merrily without going into spiritual form.

Fortunately, the damage that Rider caused concluded with merely the chandelier he partially bent by swinging from it, a guest bed he completely broke by jumping up and down on it three times, and three broken plates and two cups he smashed when he tried to help with washing the dishes. As long as it wasn't anything outside the safe house, the Yggdmillennia magi surely wouldn't get angry at destruction of the house's furnishings.

Night time came. After taking a quick shower, Rider immediately fell asleep in bed. On the other hand, Sieg gazed at the softly twinkling stars outside the window and recalled Archer and Ruler's words.

Think, and act.

The words were quite simple, but they were in fact quite hard to put into action. After all, even Ruler and Archer, who were respected and revered by the masses, sometimes became troubled and worried. If it was simply about continuing to survive in this world, the answer was simple—breathe, eat, excrete and sleep. Repeating that cyclical process could be called 'living'.

In that regard, Sieg was also living.

But when other people were added into the mix, it became quite complex. How should he regard and interact with others? Were they evil or good...? And was he himself good or evil?

He didn't think that the city where evil was constantly produced that

Assassin showed him was just... But perhaps the men and woman who lived in that city had thought it was.

Then what should he do?

How could the problem be resolved? How could everyone become happy without making any victims and with no one being evil?

“...I don’t know.”

Most likely, even sages like Archer of Black, innocent heroes like Rider of Black and saints like Ruler can’t resolve this problem, Sieg thought.

Sieg’s thoughts were correct.

If there was something evil, then heroes were the ones who fought and destroyed that evil with all their might.

But no concrete evil had existed within that city in the first place. What that place needed were salvation from poverty, the restraint of crime and, most of all, happiness for all who lived there.

It wasn’t possible to achieve that. Then was it right to leave it alone? No, it wasn’t. Then should he *choose* to save only the people who caught his attention—? But that was impossible for him.

“The salvation... of humanity, huh?”

...Speaking of which, the other side’s Ruler, Amakusa Shirou Tokisada, had declared he would save humanity.

Sieg honestly thought that was a wonderful thing. Sieg had also done his own research on Amakusa Shirou Tokisada. Though he was never officially recognized as a saint, he had risked his life to accomplish something that anyone could truly call [good].

He had stood up against the tyrannical rule of his time. He had given the pride of being human back to those who weren’t treated as humans. That—was a splendid thing that Sieg himself could never do.

Even if he was the enemy and his method was likely mistaken... if the salvation of humanity could truly be accomplished, it would be a wonderful thing. And if his method wasn’t mistaken, everyone could forget their grudges and work together to help him—

“...Hmm?”

Sieg tilted his head in puzzlement. He felt something slightly out of place in his thoughts just now.

But no matter how much he thought it over, he couldn't find the source of that out of place feeling. Since the night was growing late, Sieg decided to give up and go to sleep.

The next day, Sieg (reluctantly) went out to eat with Rider, but the chances of them getting dragged into trouble doubled as a result. Rider's excitement had risen further after basking in the sunlight. Having to deal with criminals or mere hoodlums like last night was still better than what happened when they went out.

The worst case was when Rider meddled in a quarrel between spouses.

"You guys should fight it out and clear away all your pent-up feelings!"

That was Rider's advice when he tried to mediate between the two, the worst possible conclusion. In the end, it turned into a fist fight while splashing around within a water fountain, and the wife had obtained victory with a right hook to the jaw.

...True, the couple had thanked Rider and gone home while smiling with their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders. But there had been too many sacrifices to reach that point—a coffee shop's window was broken, their clothes became soaked from the water fountain, a table was toppled over and smashed, the plate of food that had been sitting on top of it had struck Sieg right in the face, and the sauce of the uneaten pasta on the plate had made Sieg's face sticky and oily.

And, for some reason, the reimbursement for the damages was pushed onto Sieg and Rider, and they ended up being billed more than half of the money that they had received as a budget from Yggdmillennia.

It couldn't be helped, since Rider ended up forcefully dragging Sieg along each time he stopped to look at something. And Rider frequently stopped as they walked. He stopped to watch street performers, he stopped to watch a charming young couple, and he unhesitantly went to help an old man who was taking a long time to cross the street.

"You really do like trouble, don't you?"

"Uh-huh! After all, trouble is fun, and I like people too!"

When Rider said that with a beaming smile, Sieg wasn't able to do anything. It was true that Rider liked people. He smiled joyfully just by walking around and watching ordinary people.

"Why do you like people?"

"Hmm, I don't know. Then let me ask you right back; why should I hate them?"

When asked that, Sieg became troubled. What Rider watched with a smile were humans who were neither just nor evil, but merely ordinary.

There was neither good nor ill will there. It was just a piece of ordinary backdrop scenery—Sieg didn't like that wording, but that was all it was to him.

"That's right. It's like a piece of backdrop scenery. Those people are surely living lives completely unrelated to us. They probably do both bad things and good things. Which one depends on their choices, but—if I step in and influence them, maybe something will change. That's what makes it fun!"

Rider said that while smiling and laughing. He waved his arms and shouted excitedly.

"The hoodlums we met last night might think of returning to being upright citizens after having been beat up by me! The quarreling spouses earlier might have a child, and that child might discover something amazing! Or perhaps nothing will change at all! Yeah. That's why I like humans, and why I love 'what if' stories!"

Rider spun around and danced in the middle of the street. The people passing by avoided the lively Rider half out of annoyance and half out of amusement.

"I see... Yeah, somehow... I can understand that."

Sieg thought as he watched Rider. Whether or not Rider saw that scene of hell, or even if he had seen a worse hell himself in the past, he would surely come to a clear solution by easily saying 'That is that, this is this'.

As long as there were humans, he would continue to interact with them, while hoping that something fun will happen—

"Ah, hey you! You can't steal my wallet like that! Hey, hey, it's dangerous to swing around a knife—fine then! *Bang*!"

Sieg sighed and stepped forward to end this latest round of trouble quietly.

"I understand that you like people, but please at least avoid making greater trouble."

"Sorry..."

Even Rider couldn't help but hang his head dejectedly when Sieg rebuked him.

"Anyway, it's already past noon. Let's eat and hurry home—"

As Sieg said that, Rider's face suddenly sharpened. Sieg thought for a moment that he was going to make more trouble, but Rider's expression was too grim for that.

"...Rider?"

Ignoring Sieg's questioning, Rider abruptly began running.

"This presence... There's a Servant nearby...!"

Sieg frantically ran after Rider. They went off the main street into a back alley. The surrounding people made way for them in confusion. *People might get dragged into something again*—thought Sieg for an instant, but it was a needless fear.

As he ran at full speed, Rider was overflowing with the dignity of a gallant knight that he only ever showed at night. Half-hearted people hesitated to even call out to him.

Sieg ran—but Rider's feet were swift. He gave up on catching up, and the best he could do was to follow the trail of Rider's prana in order not to lose sight of him. Sieg could only think that the reason for Rider's confusing and disordered route was because he was chasing after another Servant.

"Rider!"

"I've almost caught up...!"

On his way, Rider jumped over a child playing on the street, ran over a fence to avoid a cat, and even barged into an apartment room and then jumped out its window on the other side.

“There!”

Sieg’s body tensed as he heard Rider’s shout ahead of him. It was true that a Servant was quite close by. Even Sieg could sense it, since he contained Saber of Black in his body. Most likely, the other Servant had already notice their presence as well.

It was thus that Rider turned the corner of a back alley and Sieg followed after him from a little further behind.

In the back alley that was strangely dark even though it was midday, ‘she’ stood there with her back to them.

“Ah— —!?” shouted Rider in surprise.

She turned around while letting out a brutal growl—

There was no way either Rider or Sieg could forget her face.

There was no way they couldn’t recognize her prana signature.

Despite the fact that they were in the middle of town, she was the only one who seemed as if she was on the battlefield even now.

“Y-You! What are you doing here!?”

Saber of Red replied while glaring at the two of them with suspicious eyes.

“...That’s my line.”

—It appeared she was seeing a dream.

The family who had taken upon the name of Shishigou had moved to a gloomy land in a Far East island nation where it seemed to rain all-year-round. Fair weather only lasted for a short time during summer. On most days, the skies were covered with dark grey clouds.

It was a desolate place, where people had to use up all their will and energy just to survive.

Even if they were magi, they needed food to survive. All the more so for fallen magi like them. They had to start over using worthless spells that couldn't be called proper magecraft and gaining the trust of the native people.

"We can still make it, we can still make it, we can still make it..."

What do you mean, 'you can still make it'? They had already reached their end. They had reached an unsolvable impasse; their Magic Crest had decayed and their power wasn't even a tenth of that from their golden age. Their Magic Circuits were becoming more meager with each generation, and they would eventually end up becoming merely people who 'know about magecraft'.

The insult, indignity and humiliation of it all. The end result which all magi wanted to avoid at any cost. The worst possible conclusion, where they didn't lose their lives in a challenge to learn of the abyss or in a gruesome battle between magi, but rather simply became meaningless.

No, I hate that, I hate ending like that, I hate it, hate it...

They whined unreasonably like children and sought help from other magi they were acquainted with out of desperation. Although the family had done so much for them back in their heyday, they all scorned the family and showed nothing but contempt.

"O pitiful clan. You are all already finished."

"How can we help those whose Magic Circuits are dying out?"

"It's sad, but this is also the fate of magi. No matter what you say or do, your wish won't be granted."

In the end, the one who granted their wish wasn't any of those other magi. Instead, they made a curse-like contract with a mysterious being that resembled an evil spirit.

“Well, I shall promise you prosperity.”

It cackled in amusement.

“However, this is only a loan, so remember that you’re fated to someday have it all end in an instant, understood—?”

The family said that they didn’t care. They would progress their magecraft until that day. They could come up with any number of methods to deal with it. Even if they couldn’t, their descendants surely would, someday—

They had felt prejudice and contempt towards the branch of mystical techniques in this remote land. Their new magecraft was primitive and vulgar, far removed from their sense of aesthetics.

However, on the other hand, this craft was so simple and sturdy that it was beautiful. How foolish and shallow they once were. The family passed their knowledge down the generations, warned their children and grandchildren the curse and repeatedly ordered them to come up with a measure to deal with it as quickly as possible.

Their time of prosperity was like the account of a dream. Their thesis was recognized and the Clock Tower welcomed the Shishigou family back without hiding their surprise. ‘I don’t know how you managed to make this comeback, but how wonderful. We welcome you—’

And then, their fall once more came in the blink of an eye.

They didn’t stumble down a hill, but were pushed off a cliff. Cruel treatment? Not at all. They had prepared themselves for this—however, it was a problem that they had forced upon their descendants.

Shishigou Kairi was the beginning of the end. He was the greatest masterpiece among the children the Shishigou family had given birth to until now. Having surpassed his father and attained even greater mysteries of their magecraft, he was the pride of their family.

He was introduced and married to a wife. Having not forgotten about the curse for even a moment, the family first confirmed whether he could conceive children.

And then, they realized that it had finally *started*.

"It's no good. Kairi doesn't have the ability to conceive. There are no abnormalities in his body, so this is definitely the work of the curse. Unbelievable, it has finally begun—"

First, they attempted to make it possible for him to conceive children using every kind of method. They used various medicines, performed every ritual possible and used their connections and a great deal of money to have him examined by magi who specialized in medical magecraft.

Every one of them failed miserably. They did manage to make it possible for him to conceive for an instant. But the children died immediately after being born no matter how many times they repeated it. The children would be born, melt and then fade away.

His wife immediately decided to divorce him. She spoke to him with cold, indifferent eyes.

"You really are a splendid magus. You even toy with your own children."

She's right, thought Kairi. His children always died upon being born—due to his duty to his family. They died no matter what he did—as if he had killed them himself.

His wife's family also understood at this point how far the Shishigou family had fallen and quickly washed their hands of them.

Kairi and his wife had been the best couple in terms of their qualifications as magi. That's why the Shishigou family had continued to obsess over having them give birth to a child. But at that point, the family decided they had no other choice but to adopt a child as the next successor.

The Shishigou family was desperate. They thought that, since nothing else worked, they should have Kairi pass on the Magic Crest to another child through some means. Even an adopted child would do for them.

...Even after having reached this point, it was hard to say whether they had understood the true meaning of the 'curse'. The condition of the contract they had made was to *give up magecraft when Shishigou Kairi was born*.

The act itself of producing a magus to be his successor was impossible.

Without realizing that, they somehow discovered a young girl who was

a distant relative with good compatibility. When they were introduced to each other, Kairi felt plainly depressed, knowing how scary-looking he was.

In order to further increase the Crest's compatibility with her, Kairi began living together with her.

"With this, I'll be able to become a magus just like Onii-sama. I'm so happy —"

She murmured that with a smile. She was a frail and meek young girl. Every time it rained and there was thunder, her condition would worsen. When she heard that her body would also become sturdier once the Magic Crest was transplanted to her, she smiled happily. However, her poor health would continue until it was transplanted. It couldn't be helped, so Kairi would read a book out loud to her when she went to sleep.

"I feel a bit sad that you won't read any books to me anymore once I become a magus, though —"

She said that, hanging her head in regret. Kairi muttered back, *"Once you become healthy, you can read all the books you want."* But when she sulked and said, *"That's not what I mean"*, he finally realized that she wanted him to read to her.

"It can't be helped then. I'll read books to you until you get tired of it." When he said that, she finally brightened.

Never before or after this —

— did Kairi experience such gentle, happy days in his entire life.

Those days...

...all suddenly vanished like magic on a certain day.

They cremated her body, which had turned violet after death. Following the customs of this land, and most of all fearing pollution of the soil, they burned her in fire. Kairi didn't cry. There was no way he could.

The one who had turned his eyes away more than anyone else from the possibility that *it might turn out like this* was Shishigou Kairi himself.

He had hoped that it might work. His father and the rest of the family had told him that it would be fine, so he had held onto the hope that it would all work out.

But it was all lies. He couldn't blame anyone else for what happened.

After all, Kairi had wanted to become her father. He had cruelly crushed her with that dream.

That was the truth; it was all he was left with. Tear, apologies and anything else were far out of his reach.

Shishigou Kairi calmly accepted curse in its entirety. He had searched through books, thought it all over to the point of madness, and in the end—he decided to accept that it was over.

After that, he only did things that would throw away his life. Even for a necromancer, modern battlefields were far too dangerous.

He was no longer a magus, but more like a mere user of magecraft—no, that's exactly what he was. But inside his heart, he didn't care, like a man who knew death was near and wasted all the wealth he had accumulated over the years.

Perhaps due to having the devil's luck, or perhaps because he, at the very least, refused to choose death by his own hands, Shishigou Kairi somehow managed to continue surviving in a state of being half alive. The other half of him had died when the girl had.

Each time he shed blood and collapsed on the battlefield, he remembered.

"The next time you wake up, please call me father—"

That's right. He carried the sin of having wished for her to call him that. It was hard, painful and bitter, and dying would only make it all easier—and so he would tightly clench his hands, spit out blood and get

back up each time.

Years passed. His once soft husk became hard like steel, and the hands he once used to write thesis papers became marred with countless scars.

He searched for corpses and processed them, thought up spells, and made money and wasted it immediately after.

He carried that sin.

He carried that sin, so he still lived, having yet to find a way of atonement.

At the very least, he felt as if he were dead.

And thus, when he reached the present, Shishigou Kairi encountered the Holy Grail. He was introduced to it.

His knowledge as a magus told him that reviving the dead was impossible.

His experiences of running across battlefields told him that the possibility was equal to zero.

Even so. Even so, he might find something. While half-despairing and suppressing the hope that swelled within him—he reached out for the Holy Grail.

The reason he sought the Holy Gail was simply that.

This was a common, childish story that could be found all over the world in a variety of different situations.

But that was precisely why Shishigou Kairi's passionate desire for the Holy Grail was real.

It was a method to satisfy his extremely tiny pride as a magus that he himself wasn't even aware he still had, and at the same time the method of atonement that he had finally found. And in the deepest depths of his instincts, he knew.

He knew that that this was the place where Shishigou Kairi would die.

When she awakened, Saber of Red spoke up.

“Don’t show me such a stupid dream, idiot Master.”

“Sorry for showing you a stupid dream, but I’m not an idiot, you know...”

Perhaps having an idea of what she dreamed about, Shishigou grimaced.

According to the [Spirit Board], the rogue Assassin of Black had been killed. There were no other casualties among the Black camp. As expected, it was likely easy for them to take down Assassin with Rider and Archer on their side.

Shishigou Kairi and Saber of Red had already left Trifas. The Greater Grail was no longer there, and this wasn’t the time to leisurely remain in enemy territory.

They went to Romania’s capital Bucharest, and there they worked hard to gather information on the Hanging Gardens.

This time, instead of sleeping bags, they rented a hotel room. Yggdmillennia’s clout in Romania was quite large, but even their influence vanished in the capital. Still, they rented two suites on the top floor under a pseudonym, and just in case used a suggestion spell to ‘peacefully’ take over someone else’s room.

...Saber, who had enjoyed the view from the top floor suite, couldn’t help becoming sulky when she couldn’t see anything out of the window of their borrowed room. “You can go use the suite room for yourself,” Shishigou suggested, but Saber immediately rejected it.

“No, no. As a Servant, I have to protect my Master.”

She folded her arms and spoke *just like* a Servant would.

Shishigou desperately held back from asking, ‘Did you eat something bad?’, and instead merely said, “I see.”

“So you should move to the suite room, Master. It’s okay, I’ll be by your side!”

However, though Shishigou himself had judged that the suite room was 90% likely to be safe, he couldn't sleep there while thinking of the remaining 10% uncertainty. He was quite prone to worrying.

"...You were much more desperate in my dream, though, Master."

"I don't know what kind of dream you saw, but as a bounty hunter, I always take precautions. Right down to the little details."

Even if he'll eventually die, he should die after having done everything he could. That was Shishigou Kairi's stance towards the world.

Saber of Red seemed dissatisfied, but it appeared she didn't think of leaving her Master's side even so.

After Shishigou had gotten the room and settled in, he decided to make his regular report. Technically, he should probably report to Rocco Belfegan, the one who hired him, but he was an old-fashioned magus who forbade reports by telephone or email — he didn't have such devices in the first place.

Since he wasn't going to use a sluggish enchanted communication tool that would take forever, Shishigou decide to make a simple report to El Melloi II, who did have a cellphone, instead of Belfegan.

[Hmm, I understand the situation... It really is quite serious.]

El Melloi curtly summarized the current situation in a cool-headed tone. Just as he said, the situation truly was serious.

Though the Greater Grail being stolen was a serious matter in and of itself, there was also the additional fact that it was stolen not by the Association of Magi, but by a member of the Holy Church and, furthermore, the Ruler of the Third Holy Grail War in [Fuyuki], Amakusa Shirou Tokisada.

Naturally, the Association was already taking action. Though its relationship with the Church had greatly deteriorated and fallen into an all-out stand-off for a short while, the moderate factions of both sides had apparently desperately worked to reconcile and end the conflict without incident.

The Church wasn't going to take action this time. In the first place, the mediating priest Shirou had simply gone mad and betrayed them.

Therefore, it was only proper for them to choose to wash their hands of him... Fortunately, the Church hadn't been learned that Shirou was actually Amakusa Shirou Tokisada. Though the possibility was low, it couldn't be dismissed that they might interfere in the Great Holy Grail in order to protect or use him.

"You got that right. So, how's the request I made last time coming along?"

El Melloi didn't react at all to Shishigou's presumptuous words and replied indifferently.

[No problem. It's being prepared at the location you designated. I'll send you the password later.]

"Roger that. Also, there's one more thing I'd like to ask—"

[Like you thought, I can't sense any prana from the enemy on my end either. Most likely, it's due to Assassin of Red's... Semiramis' personal skill or Noble Phantasm.]

"As expected, huh?" Shishigou clicked his tongue. He had thought that it would be possible to track a Noble Phantasm that used such a large amount of prana anywhere, but it appeared that Semiramis' class of 'Assassin' wasn't just for show.

Most likely, it was a top-class unique Noble Phantasm even among the many Noble Phantasms that Servants had used in past Holy Grail Wars.

A sword that annihilates the enemy by shooting a beam of light, armor that rejects all attacks, a war chariot that flies swiftly through the sky, a book that summons an endless stream of monsters, or something else even more unique and mysterious—there existed all different kinds of Noble Phantasms.

However, even among the many Noble Phantasms possessed by heroes, a moving fortress was unheard of. Moreover, it was currently storing the Holy Grail within itself. The situation was nothing but nightmare to the Association.

[Will you be able to pursue it?]

"No problem, the Yggdmillennia magi are constantly observing it with their familiars. They seem to have an idea where it is."

[Do you think the Hanging Gardens might be heading out of Romania?]

Shishigou thought over El Melloi's question for a little while. The chances of it were extremely high. After all, it was a flying fortress. No matter how slow its speed was, they couldn't stop it from leaving the country.

"Its flight speed is unknown. We can't be certain yet."

[I see. We've already sent squads tasked with recovering the Greater Grail to the countries bordering Romania. Depending on the situation, they'll immediately go to recover it.]

"...Understood."

He had expected it, but it seemed the Association was prepared to act at a moment's notice. That was only natural. After all, this was not just a matter of getting a wish granted—they might be able to get their hands on the Greater Grail itself. Should the Clock Tower get a hold of it, it was likely that the next Holy Grail War would break forth immediately afterwards.

...Was there really any room for him to grant his own wish at this point?

"—What was that, Master? Are those guys planning to seize the Holy Grail!?"

Saber yelled loudly behind him. Shishigou froze—and even El Melloi on the other end of the phone call was shaken by the shout.

[W-What was that just now?]

"I'm sorry. My Servant just—"

Ignoring Shishigou's attempt to smooth things over, Saber quickly grabbed the phone from him and shouted into it.

"Hey! I'm saying this just in case, but the Holy Grail is ours! I won't let you get guys try to snatch it by sneaking in from behind! Got it!?"

[.....]

While El Melloi was shocked and Shishigou was frantically trying to snatch back the phone, Saber of Red continued talking as she kept Shishigou at bay with one hand.

"Answer me, magus! We won't hand the Holy Grail over to you until it grants our wishes! Got it!?"

[...G-Got it.]

Satisfied with that response, Saber of Red threw the phone back to Shishigou.

"Ah... I'd like it if you'd forgive my Servant's words as just a little joke."

Shishigou apologized while preparing himself for the worst. After a long silence, El Melloi surprisingly didn't become indignant, but rather laughed as if slightly amused.

[Pardon my laughter. It seems we've both been troubled by our *respective* Servants.]

"...I suppose."

[I'll overlook that outburst just now. The recovery team will move in swiftly, so you should grant your wish as quickly as possible.]

The call ended there, and Shishigou let out a sigh.

"Hey, didn't you say something rude about me just now?"

"I didn't. Rather, you were the one who... no, never mind. The situation hasn't changed all that much."

In the end, for Shishigou Kairi to survive to the end of the war, his Servant would also have to necessarily remain alive at that point. Shishigou had wanted to keep his Servant's identity a secret for as long as possible and slow the Association's recovery operation should the worst happen—but if his Servant died, he didn't think he'd be able to survive in that situation.

"Right, right! As long as you continue to seek the Holy Grail, I'll be your Servant, Master!"

"Don't worry, I haven't given up. Now then, I have to do a little work. You can go and act freely on your own. You can go the hotel's top floor, go sightseeing, or anything else you want."

"Hmm... Is that really all right?"

"I'm going to be holed up in this room for a while. Just make sure to return by evening."

"Okay. Then I'll take you up on your offer."

When his Servant, who was as boisterous as a poltergeist, left the room, Shishigou sighed in relief.

After that, he took out a conspicuously large bottle from his luggage. It was the young Hydra corpse preserved in formalin that he had received as compensation for this job. He had already processed its heads into a dagger, but he hadn't had the time to use up all of its heads, so he had set it aside in a half-dissected state.

"Rider of Red is Achilles... In that case, Archer of Black is either Chiron... or maybe Paris?"

Naturally, Archer of Black's true name was information that hadn't been provided to Shishigou by Yggdmillennia. Even so, based on the way Archer had talked when they were explaining the situation and planning countermeasures, Shishigou could easily tell that there was a connection between Rider of Red and Archer of Black.

Achilles... he was the greatest hero who had participated in the Trojan War, but there were two bowmen who had been deeply connected to him during his life.

The first was Paris. The man who had been the trigger for the Trojan War and who had also dealt the fatal blow to Achilles.

Having learned of Achilles' only weakness, his heel, and having been possessed by the sun god Apollo, Paris had splendidly shot Achilles' heel even as Achilles didn't stop moving or rest for an instant on the battlefield.

He was pretty much Achilles' a mortal enemy. And at the same time, Paris had an extraordinary personal grudge against Achilles.

After all, Paris' older brother, the great hero Hector, had been killed by Achilles and then had been submitted to the indignity of having his corpse dragged across the battlefield by Achilles' chariot.

If Paris were Archer of Black... that would mean that he had been talking nostalgically about his brother's killer back when they met.

It wasn't impossible, considering the unique sense of values that heroes often had. However, it was definitely unnatural. But there was one other bowman who was deeply connected to Achilles' life.

It was none other than the man who raised Achilles, the greatest sage among the centaurs, Chiron.

Of course, Archer had a human form and lacked the lower body of a horse that should be the proof of being a centaur. However, that wasn't anything to be surprised by. After all, Chiron was born from a god and a goddess, and was a great sage who was extremely close to being a Divine Spirit.

He could probably freely take the form of a half-horse and the form of a human at will.

...Yeah, if Archer was Chiron, then it also made sense how he had wounded Rider of Red who possessed divinity. Also, Archer's great depth of wisdom that seemed to apply to everything was more characteristic of Chiron than Paris.

However—if Archer was Chiron, then that meant...

"...Yeah, it's possible."

On the other hand, Shirou, who was of the Ruler class, was on the Red side. After having met face-to-face in the Hanging Gardens' chapel, everyone who had been there knew each other's true names now thanks to Shirou and Ruler.

Chiron had been there, and so had Achilles. And the problem was one of the other Servants who had been there.

Shishigou thought about what result that would bring about—and made a decision.

Breaking down the knife he had previously made, he started constructing a new magical tool.

Saber of Red walked idly down the streets of Bucharest during midday. In addition to her excessively exposing outfit, her dignified and beautiful features attracted quite a lot of attention... However, not a single person tried to call out to her.

The public order in Romania's capital of Bucharest was terrible. At the very least, there was a high chance that a girl like her, walking outside alone in such a conspicuous outfit, would be dragged into some kind of trouble.

But there were always exceptions to every case. Whether they were street punks, pickpockets or fake policemen, as long as they were human, they would act according to their instincts.

...In other words, there was no one foolish enough to call out to a *grizzly bear in the shape of a young girl*.

"Muu. Like I thought, I should have brought Master along, even if I had to do it by force."

Saber yawned in boredom.

The people who passed by her all took notice of her beauty for an instant—but then frantically turned to look away from her. Having realized that she was being looked at, Saber wished she would get caught up in some trouble already.

Perhaps because she had seen that depressing dream, she felt like some vague emotion was gathering in her stomach. The best way to clear it away was with violence.

However, not a single person called out to her, leaving her extremely bored. There were various kinds of people, the old, the young, those who seemed good, those who seemed bad—and she was cut off and separate from all of them.

—Servants were beings that were separate from the world.

Heroic Spirits were summoned to win in the Holy Grail War. Even if they were given a second life, what was asked of them was only battle—so it couldn't be helped.

Though Saber thus reasoned in her mind, her thoughts couldn't ignore the truth that she was alone from the start even when she was alive.

Her mother Morgan had only seen her as a tool of revenge against her father. Because her growth had been quickened, there was no one who knew her from childhood either.

Even after she rose up to be a knight in Camelot, she had never interacted with the other knights.

The only thing she had was battle. Exchanging sword blows, cursing and trying to kill one another. That seemed to be the only form of communication that Saber knew.

There was only one person—who had been aware of her as ‘Mordred’ and with whom she had talked with her face unhidden.

Her father Arthur, who didn’t hold any interest in her.

Every time she remembered her father, she felt her guts boil. It was impossible to reach an understanding and be on equal ground with *that*. To be able to converse with that mechanical doll that was extolled as the ideal king, she had to, at the very least, become king herself—

“Ah— —!?”

Her thoughts were suddenly cut off by a hysterical shout. Even though she had wished for someone to call out to her just a little earlier, now she felt irritation strong enough to make her want to send the speaker flying without asking any questions first.

“Be quiet. Just who—”

“Y-You! What are you doing here!?”

When she turned around, Saber of Red couldn’t help widening her eyes. Standing there was Rider of Black, wearing modern clothing like her and standing warily to cover the homunculus with him.

“...”

“...”

Rider of Black and Saber of Red fell into an awkward silence.

They weren’t exactly enemies right now. But things weren’t reconciled between them either. Still, if there had been any other humans or Servants present, they would have managed to bear it, but right now there was no one to stop them.

“...That’s my line. So, do you wanna pick a fight here?”

Saber of Red faintly smiled, making Rider of Black lose his temper.

“I could ask you the same thing. I’m fine either way. If you wanna go at it, then bring it.”

He really doesn’t seem to have learned his lesson after having been so badly beaten down by me before. This is a good opportunity to relieve some stress, I’ll smash him down completely one more time here —

Just as Saber of Red was going to take a step forward, another character took the stage. He stepped in front of Rider of Black and spoke to him while waving his right hand in greeting.

“Saber of Red, it’s been two days since we last saw each other. There’s something I’d like to ask you, so could we talk a little if you have some free time?”

“Eh?”

“Huh?”

—Talk?

Ignoring the dumfounded reactions of the other two, the boy asked once more.

“Are you busy right now?”

“No, I’m not really busy, but... is it really fine?”

Saber of Red looked at the boy suspiciously. She couldn’t find any anger, hatred or even fear in the boy’s calm expression... He’d been killed by her, but it seemed that incident was already treated as a closed matter within the boy.

The boy nodded like a drinking bird³.

“Yeah, we also have some free time right now.”

“Wha, no, wait...”

“Are you busy, Rider? Then we can separate and —”

“No, no, no, no, no, no! I’ll go, I’ll go with you!”

3. Drinking birds: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drinking_bird

After looking first at the boy and then Rider of Black, Saber of Red frowned and spoke.

"All right. Where will we go to talk?"

The three of them began walking down the main street. Although Sieg and Rider had randomly gotten involved with other people when they were walking through the streets earlier (and Sieg had desperately stopped the joyful Rider from going out of control each time), now everyone they passed seemed to avert their faces from them.

It appeared to be because of Saber of Red who walked at their head... Certainly, her brutal presence, which could be clearly felt even from behind her, was unbearable for normal people.

"So. Just what on earth are you guys doing here?"

Saber of Red looked over her shoulder and asked them. The sullen-looking Rider had his arms crossed and his face turned away.

"We have no obligation to ans—"

"Rider was insistent on going out, so I was chosen to keep an eye on him. Ruler seemed to judge that he wouldn't do anything too absurd as long as I'm with him."

Sieg replied as if to restrain Rider.

"What's your reason for coming to Bucharest in the first place?"

"I don't know, but apparently it's necessary."

"Hmm," said Saber of Red with a shrug. She thought about reporting this to her Master, but since he was in the middle of working, she decided to tell him later.

"I heard that Assassin of Black died. Is that right?"

"...Yeah, she died."

Rider was still ignoring Saber, so Sieg answered instead.

"I see," Saber murmured disinterestedly.

"So, why are you here in Bucharest, Saber?"

"I have no obligation to answer... Well, we thought it wouldn't be good for us to continue staying in Trifas. That's all."

Though they had temporarily decided to work together, Trifas was still enemy territory for her and her Master. This answer which Saber's Master, Shishigou Kairi, had given her was extremely valid.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"That's right, Sieg. What do you walk to talk about with someone like this?"

"...You've been far too grumpy since earlier."

Saber of Red murmured in amazement, and Rider of Black vehemently protested.

"What are you saying!? As if I could forget that you killed him!"

"Well, I don't really care about it myself."

"Hey, you should care, you know!?"

Rider of Black retorted to Sieg's calm words. To Sieg, it wasn't a problem since he was alive now. Of course, it was only natural for a victim to have painful feelings—to feel hate towards the perpetrator.

But this wasn't the time for that right now.

They weren't enemies right now, so Sieg had thought he might be able to talk to her a bit. After all, Saber of Red was Mordred—the Knight of Rebellion who had ended King Arthur's legend.

She might have her own personal view about human beings.

Sieg wanted to ask her that. He didn't want an answer from her, but an opinion.

"No, well, if you're okay with it, it's fine, but... All right, I'll forgive you for having *survived my Noble Phantasm*. There, now we're even."

...Does that really make us even? Sieg tilted his head in puzzlement, but Saber of Red seemed to be in a good mood, so he decided not to comment.

"Here, huh?"

Seeming to imply without words ‘This is the perfect choice’, Saber of Red quickly opened the door of a coffee shop. Sieg and Rider followed behind her.

“Welcome.”

A grey-mustached shopkeeper greeted the three of them in a somewhat brusque manner. Fortunately, there were no other customers to be seen. Though, since this was the state of the shop at lunchtime, they might not be able to expect good taste from the food here...

“Sieg, what will you have?”

“...A ham sandwich and coffee.”

“Then I’ll have the same.”

Saber of Red took a while to think over the menu she had been given before she spoke.

“I’ll have a grilled chicken sandwich, a green apple sundae, a seafood buster and beef steak, and for dessert, umm, three of these muffins. Ah, and a coffee too.”

Sieg and Rider exchanged glances, and then looked at the shopkeeper.

“...Miss, can you eat all that?”

“I wouldn’t order it if I couldn’t eat it. Do you have it or not? If not, instead I’ll have—”

When Saber was about to take out the menu again, the shopkeeper frantically stopped her.

“It’s fine, I’ll bring out everything you ordered!”

The shopkeeper headed back to the kitchen in a panic. It appeared he was managing the shop by himself, based on the shop’s smallness and old interior design. Fortunately, however, the shop wasn’t unsanitary.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

When the shopkeeper was gone, Saber of Red immediately leaned forward.

“Do you mind if I explain it from the beginning?”

When Sieg asked her that, Saber of Red made a bitter face, but agreed as long as he kept it short.

Sieg first explained a little about his own origins—and then spoke about what kind of Servant Assassin of Black had been.

And by the time he finished briefly explaining the illusion Assassin showed him, their order arrived at their table in large amounts.

“...Before grumbling about other things, let’s eat first, okay?”

“All right.”

“Good idea.”

It wasn’t that Saber of Red was fixated on eating. Rather, since she had a contract with a first-rate magus, she didn’t even need to eat.

But that was that, and this was this. She was capable of eating. Moreover, she was a Servant, a being that existed outside of the world’s logic.

80% of the reason she ate wasn’t to fill her stomach, but out of pure curiosity.

“...Muu. I want to make another order, but that wouldn’t be nice to the shopkeeper, and my stomach isn’t particularly empty. I don’t have any money, either.”

“Because I’m afraid of what would happen if I gave you money...” Sieg murmured seriously. Rider had been making a ruckus saying “Let’s buy that” and “Let’s buy this” ever since they left Trifas.

...There was no meaning in buying a clearly fake platinum ring. Moreover, when Sieg declared it was a fake, the owner of the street stall became angry—that was one of the few examples where Sieg made the disturbance worse.

Saber of Red greedily devoured her sandwich at a frightful pace and then moved on to attack her steak.

“By the way, where’s your Master? That rough-looking guy wearing sunglasses.”

Rider of Black raised a finger to his brow in curiosity.

"He's in the middle of working in his workshop. My presence there was in the way, so I went out."

"We're going to be using airplanes, but what about you guys?"

"I don't know either. But probably something similar? After all, it's those Hanging Gardens we're talking about."

"True," Rider agreed with a nod.

Since they were going to a flying fortress, their means of getting there were limited. It would have to be either an aircraft or flight enabled by magecraft. And whichever method they chose, it didn't change the fact that the fortress would be firmly defended.

It didn't matter how frail their transport was. Even if there was an enchanted flight device that could withstand top-class spells, it would be no different than paper and plywood in the face of EX rank spells.

"I think we can somehow make it through if my hippogriff seriously goes all out, though."

" _ _ "

" _ _ "

Saber of Red became speechless, and Sieg covered his eyes. Seeing their reactions, Rider asked "What's wrong?" while holding his sandwich.

"Hippogriff, hippogriff... Ah, could it be that you're that hero? From Charlemagne's something or other, Astolfo?"

"Yeah, that's right. Wait, I didn't tell you that, did I?"

"You didn't. I know about the guy beside you being Siegfried, though."

"I see," said Rider of Black in a calm and accepting manner.

"...Well, learning it now doesn't make any difference."

Saber of Red didn't show much surprise.

"Right? I was viciously beaten by you! But I've changed Masters now, so there's no way to know how it will go next time, you know?"

Saber of Red sneered and shrugged.

"I'm not going to be defeated to the likes of you. Idiots should think

before speaking, idiot.”

“Someone who calls someone else an idiot is an idiot!”

“Hah?”

...As the atmosphere was getting somewhat dangerous, Sieg quickly raised his hand.

“More coffee, please!”

Because he shouted it so loudly, the two Servants looked at Sieg in surprise.

“...Well, whatever. I’ll also have more coffee.”

“Me too!”

“That costs extra here.”

The shopkeeper said that curtly, but Sieg said they didn’t mind. He should still have at least that much money left.

“Now then. You want an answer your question, about whether humans are good or bad, right?”

When Sieg nodded, Saber of Red sighed as if astounded from the bottom of her heart.

“Are you an idiot? Humans are humans, beasts that can become either good or bad depending on the situation. In the end, they’re merely slightly intelligent animals that lose all manners and virtue when they lack food and clothing. I don’t care about others. As long as I myself can continue living as a superior being—got it?”

Saber of Red’s opinion was harsh and straightforward. She didn’t see humans as either good or bad.

They merely... fell down either path depending on the situation. And they were all foolish. That’s why she didn’t care about others and only placed importance on herself.

“Do you hate humans?”

Saber of Red answered in the affirmative without flinching at Sieg’s frank question.

"I hate them. Even though they don't forget grudges, they forget the debts they owe to others. If something will disadvantage them, they'll avoid it even if they have to sacrifice everything around them. Even though they do good deeds when it's convenient, they don't mind overlooking great evil when it's troublesome for them. They act out of selfishness, and if they fail, they use the excuse of saying it's the fault of something besides themselves. They're not worth protecting for even a penny. That's what humans are. How about it, are you disappointed?"

Having spoken her conclusion, Saber stabbed at her steak with her fork.

"Hmm... what a sad conclusion."

Saber of Red didn't waver even at Rider of Black's words. Sieg went into deep thought for a while, and then asked another question.

"Then, Saber of Red, is that also the reason you rebelled when you were alive?"

In an instant, the atmosphere chilled.

"...No. How I feel about humans had nothing to do with my rebellion. Don't speak of it again."

Saber of Red's gaze immediately became filled with killing intent. Most likely, if Sieg said anything further, she really would cut him down. Sieg wondered if she was a moody person. Certainly, just talking with her was a trial in and of itself.

"But hey, leaving aside the matter of the rebellion itself—there were also people you followed you, weren't there?"

Just when Sieg thought to close this subject, Rider of Black thoughtlessly stepped into the conversation. Perhaps also having thought the subject would end there, Saber of Red widened her eyes at Rider.

"Weren't there people who adored you and put their life on the line to make you king? Do you despise them too? If so, I think that's sad."

Sieg felt as if his heart were being strangled, and he restrained his hand upon which his Command Spells were engraved. If they picked a fight in the middle of this huge city, and at midday at that, it would create a huge panic. But he didn't think that Rider of Black and Saber of Red were the type of people that could use that much self-control.

Even the completely unrelated shopkeeper seemed to notice the abnormal mood as he froze while carrying a coffeepot in hand.

But ignoring the two other people present who were stiff with fear, Saber of Red merely sighed and shrugged. It appeared there was no problem as long as it was a question about the people who followed her and not the facts of the rebellion itself.

“Not really. They had to bet on me for their own reasons. They needed to rebel against King Arthur. Just as I don’t despise those who rebelled against me, I have no intention of viewing those who served me as the same as me.”

“So you despise them all equally?”

“—I’m someone meant to become king. How can a king view the people the same as himself? Will the people be saved if the king cries and laughs with them? That’s not it. That’s not what a king should be.”

Saber of Red quietly said that without any anger or scorn in her voice.

“You want to become king?”

“Basically, yeah. Because during my life—I failed.”

Saber clicked her tongue in annoyance. In other words, that was her wish for the Holy Grail.

Her declaration that she was ‘someone meant to become king’ was quite far off from reality. But neither Rider nor Sieg raised any eyebrows at it. At the very least, Sieg didn’t think he had the right to disparage someone else’s wish when he didn’t have any wishes of his own.

“...What’s with you two? You suddenly became quiet.”

“No, nothing really. I can’t refute your words. I never became king and... though I did think about becoming one a little, I only had enough ambition to ‘accept it if it were offered to me’.”

“Like Rider, I can’t refute you either. The position of king is far too distant for me.”

The only ones who had the right to say that her words were mistaken were those who were once kings... and those who tried to become kings like her.

"All wishes are equally precious. Well, I would have to object to a wish like humanity's annihilation, though. But your wish belongs to you alone. Finding fault with it would be wrong—at least, that's my philosophy."

Rider of Black replied with an unusually serious expression, causing Saber of Red to unpleasantly fall silent. Rider then asked her another question as if to take advantage of that opening.

"But—still, even so, there's one thing I'd like to ask. Do you want to become a bad king, or a good king?"

Rider of Black asked that question not as a king himself, but as a retainer who had served a king.

It was a simple question, but one that couldn't be avoided.

...Saber of Red's expression distorted slightly. She tried to open her mouth, but hesitated slightly and turned her gaze to the side.

And then, she squeezed out a short sentence.

"—A good king, obviously."

Rider of Black merely murmured "I see" in response. Afterwards, Saber of Red finished her coffee and stood up.

"You're leaving?"

"Our business here is done... Or do you have something else to ask?"

Sieg shook his head. She had seriously told him her opinion from another point of view, different from that of Ruler, Rider and Archer of Black.

He didn't completely agree with it. But he didn't fully reject it either. Right now, he was still in the stage of thinking about it.

"No, there's nothing else. Thank you, it was useful as a reference," Sieg replied.

Saber of Red then gave a bold smile and ruffled Sieg's hair roughly.

"Then the next time I'll see you guys will be at the Hanging Gardens. Make sure to survive until then!"

With those final words, she gallantly left the shop. Watching her leave, Sieg murmured with a sigh.

“...She ate that much and yet left without paying her share.”

“She really is like a king in that regard,” Rider of Black said as he burst into laughter.

While walking through the streets, Saber of Red thought back on the earlier question.

“What kind of king—huh?”

Saber of Red had answered ‘a good king’. That wasn’t a lie. At the very least, she had no intention of being a bad king that would be struck down by another hero.

But, in the first place, what should she do to become a good king? She should probably rule not tyrannically, but benevolently. As long as the confrontational relationship with neighboring countries wasn’t resolved, she should train and strengthen her nation’s soldiers—No, that wasn’t it.

It wasn’t something so obvious. Rider of Black seemed to have been asking a much more fundamental question.

—What kind of king do you want to become?

Saber of Red thought it over. Right now, she was fighting in order to become king. If she challenged the Sword of Selection that bestowed the qualifications of a king, she was sure that she would pull it out.

She wanted to become the ideal king. She wanted to become a king that could protect everyone that she should protect, a king that everyone wished for.

Then, should she become the ideal king of the masses like her father?

Or should she become a greedy king who would drag down everyone for the sake of granting her own dream?

An ideal king would surely feel suffocating. A greedy king would surely be despised by the people.

Saber of Red absentmindedly watched the people walking down the streets. According to the knowledge the Holy Grail had given her, this country of Romania still had fresh scars from when it was ruled by a tyrant.

He had ruled tyrannically under twisted delusions and had possessed a gorgeous palace constructed meaninglessly. In the end, the tyrant was struck down by a rebellion.

I won't become that kind of king, thought Saber of Red.

Then, should he become a perfect king that sacrificed herself for her ideals like her father? Even though even her father had been forced to bend down in defeat halfway down that path?

“...Damn it.”

Rider had pointed out the very thing she had averted her eyes from.

She had merely yearned to ‘become king’—while never looking at what lay beyond that goal at all.

Had other kings seen it? Tyrants, wise rulers and even foolish rulers who had left their names in history—had they seen what lay beyond the establishment of their rule?

What had her father, Arthur Pendragon, tried to see in the future of the country she ruled?

“...What future? It was all destroyed by me.”

Saber of Red gave a self-deprecating smile. King Arthur’s rule had gone well. She had certainly guided Britain into peace. The one who spoiled all that was none other than Saber of Red herself.

What was so bad about it—? After all, she hadn’t regretted it even once.

Many people had lost their lives in that rebellion, including her and even her father who as a knight had tried to be the sword and shield of the people.

But, if she hadn’t rebelled, the soul of the knight known as Mordred would have died.

Not acknowledged by anyone, gaining no interest from anyone, not loved by anyone or loving anyone. A peaceful world was a wonderful thing. The people who wagered their lives for its sake were also wonderful.

But why had the one who had given up everything for the sake of that

wonderful dream not received even a little bit of affection?

She didn't even think of asking to be loved. If at least... if at least some interest had been shown towards her, if she had been at least looked at, that alone would have been enough.

What a foolish thing to say. You would never have been satisfied. You would have endlessly sought love, sought compassion and finally sought the right to the throne, until you spoiled that peaceful rule in the end —

A whisper came from deep inside her. Though she felt irritated at it, she also agreed with it.

That might be true, Saber of Red thought, reflecting on herself. After all, she didn't even know what affection was. Was it sweet, bitter, sour or bland?

...But all people in this world sought it. It was surely a habitual thing, like a narcotic.

Until evening came, Saber of Red sat on a bench in a small park and stared up at the sky with her head in the clouds. She couldn't laugh at that homunculus. He was struggling and worrying over how to view human beings, but Saber of Red was struggling over what it meant to be king.

From the perspective of others, either worry was probably something people would laugh at as a stupid joke. But if they didn't obsess over these things, neither she nor that boy would be able to live —

She passed the time like that for a little while, but in the end, no one appeared to try and talk to her.

When she returned to the hotel, Shishigou appeared to have finished his work and was wiping his sweat off with a towel.

"Welcome back. Did anything happen?"

Thinking that there was no particular reason to report what happened at lunch, Saber merely replied, "Nope, nothing." Then, just as her Master was heartily drinking some mineral water, Saber made up her mind and asked him.

"Hey, Master. Have you ever loved someone?"

Naturally, Shishigou choked badly in response. After desperately coughing, he looked at his Servant reproachfully.

"What's with this all of a sudden? That's a very odd question—"

"It doesn't matter why. Have you, Master?"

Surmising that she wasn't teasing him, but asking it seriously, Shishigou started to think it over while rubbing his beard.

"...In what sense do you mean? Like love for one's family, or love for a lover?"

"Is there a difference? Then either one is fine. Have you ever loved?"

Saber of Red leaned forward and stared at Shishigou. She didn't seem like she would retreat a single step until she heard his answer.

"I haven't."

"Like I thought, that's how magi are."

"Hey, that's prejudice. No, that view of magi isn't exactly mistaken—but a magus can also love someone in their own way."

Though, that love was probably a little different from the kind of love that Saber of Red was asking about. To be a magus and to attain greatness as a magus was their happiness, so their love was often far from normal love, taking a twisted form. They had their own way of expressing love, in other words.

"In my case, I've been divorced from my wife since a long time ago. I wasn't able to produce any children, and you already know what happened to my adopted child. My father disowned me the moment I decided to be a bounty hunter."

His wife had been a woman who thought the prosperity of her family was everything, as proper for a magus. She divorced him before love or even the appearance of love could form between them. He could only vaguely remember her face at this point.

His father had tried to do whatever it took to make a successor without giving up. But Shishigou Kairi had declared that one sacrifice was enough and left home. His father had been completely opposed to his decision

back then. Magi hired by his father had attacked him several times in order to take back his Crest as well.

His mother—was someone who he didn't care whether she was there or not. She hadn't been involved in raising him at all; she was simply the woman who gave birth to him.

"What, so you haven't known love either, Master?"

"I do know about it. I just never had any luck with it."

And most of all, he had no interest in it. The world of decent and respectable people extolled it loudly. *Love is everything, love is life, love is a great thing that conquers all—*

Shishigou, who lived in the unrespectable world, knew. Love was simply a tense state of mind, and it didn't have any useful impact on the use of magecraft and weapons. Rather, it increased the chances of failure instead of success.

To magi, love was unnecessary—even if they understood that it was something precious for humans.

"...Tch. Like I thought, magi are no good."

Saber clicked her tongue annoyingly—and Shishigou smiled wryly.

"Magi are pretty much failures as human beings, Saber."

"Master. I will pull out the Sword of Selection. I must pull it out. And I will become king."

Shishigou nodded silently. And then, Saber spoke frustratingly.

"But that's as far as I can imagine. What should I do in order to become a king that surpasses the King of Knights—I don't know what to do at all."

Her worry was earnest and poignant.

"And that made you think of loving someone?"

"...I don't understand it. I don't understand it, so I thought I should become a king different from my father."

Mordred's father—the legendary king whose fame extended across the world, Arthur Pendragon. The great and unequaled hero who had struggled through many wars and succeeded in uniting Britain.

"My father's reign was absolutely perfect. Perfectly impartial and upright. He understood that ten couldn't be maintained, so he took nine and cast away one. There was neither hesitation nor confusion in his actions. All except in regard to me."

As she spoke of her father, Saber of Red's eyes shined blazingly. Saber held both fanatic faith and freezing hatred towards her father.

Both of them were correct feelings and correct views.

"Master, what— —"

'What should I do?' was the question she couldn't bring herself to ask. She understood enough to know that this wasn't a question Shishigou could answer for her.

Shishigou blew out smoke from the cigar he had lit without her noticing and spoke to his Servant.

"...Well, I do understand one thing."

"What?"

"You have to face your father."

"Face my father—"

"I understand you hate him. I also understand how much you admire him as well. But those feelings come from chasing after him. If you're going to surpass him, then analyze. Your father, other people and yourself. Observe, analyze, sort everything out, and reach a conclusion."

"...I don't particularly admire him."

Saber of Red turned the other way annoyingly. Shishigou would only be stirring up a hornet's nest if he retorted the wrong way, so he merely murmured, "Is that so?"

"Well, it served as a good reference. Thanks, Master."

"You're welcome. Now then, we'll remain on stand by for a little while until the Yggdmillennia guys move... My gut is telling me that the next

fight is going to be the last battle. Once it's over, I'll get my reward for this job and you'll grant your wish with the Holy Grail and challenge the Sword of Selection. I'd like to see it happen as thanks for our partnership until now, but I suppose that's impossible."

It was unclear how she would challenge the Sword of Selection. But if her wish was granted properly by the Holy Grail, it would undoubtedly require jumping beyond the concept of time and space.

He didn't think a mere magus like himself could cross over it to watch.

Even so, he still wished to see the moment she became king. Did he feel that way out of loneliness, or was it simply a selfish whim on his part—?

"Don't worry about it. You'll also grant your wish at that moment, Master. As if either of us would have the time to think about the other then—"

Just as she finished saying that, Saber burst into laughter. Shishigou frowned at her sudden mirth.

"Hey, what is it?"

"No... I just remembered your wish. To have descendants, right?"

"It's not something to laugh at. I'm serious here."

Saber waved her arms while laughing as if to hold him back.

"No, that's not it. If your wish is granted, that means you'll have children, right? Shishigou Junior..."

After having managed to say that much, she was unable to hold back and started laughing again. Most likely, she was imagining in her head a baby wearing sunglasses and smoking a cigar.

"Master's child... kukuku... No good, it's too hilarious to imagine!"

"Don't go off and imagine someone else's child and then laugh. Unbelievable—"

Even as he was astounded by her behavior, Shishigou's lips curved into a smile.

Saber of Red's worries were likely so serious it would affect her continued existence. It wasn't something that Shishigou could speak on any further.

Because he and she weren't partners walking the same path, but merely cooperators joined out of mutual interest. Her path and his path would eventually diverge from each other.

—Suddenly, something like a *passing demon* seized Shishigou's heart.

He opened his mouth, but stopped himself just before he put it into words. Even if he was a magus, Shishigou was the type to worry over omens and jinxes.

Naturally, speaking or even thinking of an impossible future was an ill omen.

"Now then, Master. What do we do next?"

Saber of Red leaned forward readily.

"Next?"

"Yeah. You've finished your preparations, right? What do we do now?"

"Ah, that's what you mean. Next—we wait."

"I see, we wait, huh... Until when?"

"Who knows? I said so earlier, but we can't do anything until the others start moving."

"...Could it be that there's nothing to do?"

"Of course there is. I have calls to make, reports to write and my mind to sharpen. There's a ton of stuff to do."

"Anything for me to do!?"

"None—if I said that, would you get angry? Yeah, you'd get angry."

"I won't get angry! But I'll go on a rampage!"

Saber growled like a mad dog. Shishigou sighed and handed over a

DVD he had purchased while she was out in town.

“What’s this?”

The image of a fighter plane scattering flames and flying through the air was on the package cover. It wasn’t an actual photo, but rather seemed to be an extremely realistic drawing.

“Go watch it. This is what you need to do right now.”

Shishigou said that while puffing out his chest proudly.

“This? Really...?”

Even as she grumbled, she put the DVD in the video player prepared in their hotel room. After three minutes of the movie playing, Saber began to get engrossed in watching it.

When nighttime came, Ruler arrived at the hideout.

“Sorry I’m late...”

After Ruler apologized, Sieg replied in a badgering manner.

“You really are late. It’s already deep into the night. This city is extremely dangerous at night. Wouldn’t it have been better for you to come tomorrow instead?”

“Ahaha. I don’t think it makes much difference for me whether it’s dangerous or not.”

Actually, she had gotten involved in various ruckuses on the way to the hideout—or rather, she seemed to have willingly gotten herself involved.

When she encountered people who had tried to use violence against others, she thoroughly carved the brutality of violence into them. When she encountered people who tried to cajole others with sweet words, she had smashed them with a pure and sound argument right on the spot.

Thanks to that, she had ended up arriving far later than planned... Ruler thus explained and apologized.

"Well, you probably won't get injured, let alone die, no matter what trouble you get involved in, But even if it isn't dangerous for you, I don't think you should proactively involve yourself in trouble."

"...Fufu."

Ruler giggled as if strangely enjoying herself. "What's so funny?" Sieg asked as his frown deepened.

"No, I'm laughing at something to do with me. More importantly, where's Rider? Don't tell me he went out or is rampaging out in the streets or is running naked out in the streets...!?"

"Rider isn't that ba—no, he might be that bad, but he isn't causing any problems right now. He went into the bath."

"I-Is that so? I dirtied my hands a little, so I'll be borrowing your washroom."

She seemed to have dirtied her hands with blood while saving and treating a victim. She couldn't leave it like that forever, but she also felt awkward over washing off the blood in the kitchen sink, so Ruler tried to go into the washroom.

"...Ah, is that all right?"

"What's all right?"

"No, I mean, Rider is in the bath..."

Most homes had the washroom and bath adjoined to each other. There was a possibility that Rider would come out from the bath while she was in there.

"Ah, there's no problem. Neither I nor Rider are that bashful."

After all—

"We're the same gender."

After saying that, she stepped into the washroom and shut the door. Sieg stood there dumbfounded at her words for a little while.

"Wai—"



Somehow managing to reorganize his chaotic thoughts, Sieg finally realized that Ruler was under a *fatal misunderstanding*, and he hurriedly tried to call her back... but by then it was too late.

As Ruler was scrupulously washing the blood off her hands with soap in the washroom, the door to the bath opened and a voice said "Huh?" in surprise. Ruler turned around with a smile.

"Ah, Rider. If you're getting out, could you let me go in next— —"

The next instant.

The world stood still. (Or perhaps history shook.)

Having received, through Assassin of Red, a notice from their Master Shirou to convene together, the Red Servants gathered in the throne room.

"— According to my doves, the Black camp has finally begun to move. Though it's later than expected, they will likely arrive here in around four days through some means."

The Red Servants accepted this news without surprise.

"...You didn't call us all here just for that, right?"

At Lancer of Red's question, Shirou nodded and raised his right arm. The countless Command Spells engraved on it shined with a dull light.

"I'm sorry, but I won't be able to command you all on the front lines. However, that will make it difficult for me to immediately react if Ruler uses her Command Spells. Therefore, I will use two Command Spells on each of you and raise your resistance to any Command Spells from her."

Both their Master's Command Spells and Ruler's Command Spells had equal power of compulsion. Therefore, by limiting the activation conditions and using two Command Spells to do it, Shirou could repulse Ruler's Command Spells with almost no time loss.

"That's quite excessive of you."

When Rider of Red murmured that, Shirou smiled boldly.

"Then do you all need extra assistance from a Command Spell in battle

at this point?"

"—No."

Lancer and Archer, who were also going to fight on the front lines, didn't voice any objections either. If possible, they also wanted to avoid the pitiful end of being forced to kill themselves by Ruler's Command Spells.

"Then I wish you all luck in battle."

The Command Spells on his arm gradually shined brighter.

"I order my Servants with my Command Spells— —"

Rider and the other Servants then left, leaving only Shirou, Assassin and Caster in the throne room.

Shirou spoke up.

"Assassin, Caster. With this, my role in the coming battle is finished. I'll leave the rest to you all."

"Do you have a chance at succeeding?"

"I do. The Fuyuki Greater Grail doesn't have anything that can be called a will. It is an automated machine that lacks the will of a master. If I can reach the core without opposing it or coming into contact with it—"

"Your wish will be granted."

Assassin of Red smiled. But Shirou shook his head and corrected her.

"This isn't my wish, but the wish of everyone in this world— Assassin."

The happy conclusion that everyone desired and continued to wish for in the depths of their heart.

"In other words, a brilliant summer shall arrive! And thus I will have written another masterpiece as well."

"Exactly. Though we have to take down the members of the Black camp to do that."

"Oh my, you're not confident of our odds?"

“As if.”

Assassin of Red’s lips twisted into a smile. Though it would be a different story anywhere else, there wasn’t any need to doubt their victory if they fought in these Hanging Gardens.

“Also, we have Caster’s Noble Phantasm, right? However—I still have doubts. It’s true that Noble Phantasms are objects that embody and realize miracles, but... Can it really do such a thing?”

“Well... who knows?”

Assassin glared in response to Shirou’s vague words.

“If it works just as Caster says, it only manifests possibilities. In theory, it should be possible. We don’t need to worry about prana either. Though I’m somewhat uneasy about it, I will be defenceless until I completely bring the Holy Grail under my control. And if Lancer ends up being killed, you’ll have to make a last stand here. But most of all—*it seems fun.*”

Assassin could only stare dumbfounded at hearing those final words. On the other hand, Caster nodded elatedly as if he understood and agreed.

“Yes, the insatiable pursuit of amusement itself is essential. Then, using all the power of my treasured Noble Phantasm, I will show you the power of the written word, which not even swords, magecraft, fire, or lightning can match!”

Watching Caster and Shirou swell with excitement, Assassin gave a small sigh of exasperation.

— —Now then.

Naturally, there were good reasons for why Ruler left to go to the hideout in Bucharest later than the other two. One was to have a negotiation session with Fiore, who had asked Sieg to help their side.

“You want me to write a contract?”

“Yes. A contract that guarantees the safety and well-being of the homunculi. Currently, you’ve only made a verbal promise, and there

will be no one to protect them after we leave.”

“They’re stronger than I am, though—”

Gordes, who had earnestly been taking care of the homunculi’s tuning and adjustments, had been spewing nothing but idle complaints lately. Perhaps because he was always being dragged away by the homunculi whenever an abnormality occurred among them regardless of the time of day, even when he was eating or sleeping, the glint in his eyes had started to shine blazingly like those of an emergency hospital doctor. He had no vigor left, but he was uplifted by a half self-destructive desperation.

“But you’re right. It’s impossible to believe the words of a magus without any form of guarantee.”

“Yes, so I’d like to ask you to enter into a security guarantee contract with the homunculi. Once that’s been confirmed, we’ll move on to the agreement we made earlier.”

Fiore thought it over for a while, and then nodded, stating it wasn’t a bad deal. Either way, if they won, she and the rest of Yggdmillennia would no longer have any jobs to give them. They would only be able to do maintenance on the castle ramparts at most.

“Then, I’ll make the contract with the homunculi—”

“Nee-san, you’re going to make a contract with these homunculi? I think their self of sense has developed too much for that, though.”

At Caules’ words, Fiore covered her mouth and said, “Oh my.” Just as he said, in a contract between magi, one’s full name was had a lot of importance attached to it. A name was like an address that every being had.

When using curses, the target’s true name was indispensable information as well. If the curse wasn’t restrained to a specific existence like a name, it would disperse without any effect.

And these homunculi had started to develop a sense of self the moment they chose not to obey orders. In other words, there was ample reason to fear that simply referring to them all as [homunculi] as they had up until now could create an obstacle in forming a contract.

“Have no fear. Gordes-dono has given us all names,” stated Tool as she and the rest of the gathered homunculi nodded.

"I don't know whether or not it will work with the contract. I don't think there will be a problem, though."

Gordes looked away in a sulky manner. *He couldn't be embarrassed, could he?* Caules thought, but judging from his expression, he really did seem to be sulking.

"My, how serious and diligent of you, Gordes-oji-sama."

And Fiore praised Gordes without minding his behavior at all. When he was praised, Gordes became even sulkier. *What a difficult old man*, Caules thought with a sigh.

"Then there should be no obstacles to the contract. We'll make it by slightly adjusting the regular content of a contract between magi. Basically, in exchange for allowing your residence in this castle, I'd merely like for you to help with routine chores and the maintenance of the castle ramparts. I don't have any problem with you leaving either. However, please refrain from acts that will be scowled upon by the Association of Magi."

"There aren't that many homunculi among us who want to leave. But there are some problems with legal identification and such—"

"Hmm... we can provide that much at least."

Fiore added in several modifications to the contract content that Caules suggested, and then presented it to the leader of the homunculi, Tool. When she accepted it, she frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"No, it's just that this whole deal went more smoothly than I thought. I wondered if you might have added in a trap somewhere or not."

"You're quite distrustful, aren't you?"

Gordes goggled at her in shock.

"If you think about how we've been treated until now, isn't it only right to think that way?" Tool responded coolly.

"Now, now," Fiore said as she soothed the two of them. "Please calm down. It's precisely because I thought I might be doubted that I asked

the judge of the Great Holy Grail War to arbitrate these negotiations.”

Ruler received the contract and seriously read it over.

Incidentally, Ruler—Jeanne d’Arc—didn’t truly understand contract stipulations. She was simply more sensitive to deceptions of this kind than others by nature.

Her final year before her death in particular was a battle of words and sentences. Clergymen had tried to trip her up with various questions. In order to overcome that, Jeanne had faced them with the same seriousness she had on the battlefield.

While passing her eyes over the contract, she sometimes glanced at Fiore who had written it and Caules and Gordes who had helped in doing so. There was no deceit or malice in their eyes. Gordes’ somewhat rude attitude was simple sulking on his part and didn’t seem to be anything else.

She thought of the merits and demerits of lying in this situation—the merits were too few and the demerits were too big. It was fine to conclude that there weren’t any lies in concern to this contract.

“There doesn’t seem to be any problem. Just in case, I’d like for everyone to look at it as well.”

After saying that, Ruler passed the contract to Tool. Tool and the surrounding homunculi then began to carefully read it with serious expressions on their faces. Normally, homunculi were only dolls that obeyed the orders of their creator. But now they were seriously gazing at a contract that had been written in regards to them.

In other words, that was proof of their developing ego. However, that couldn’t be called unilaterally good. The ego included thoughts to increase personal gain as much as possible. That could also lead to committing crimes as a result.

It could lead them to step over others for personal gain—However, at the same time, Ruler optimistically thought that it wouldn’t be a problem for them.

They were *beings created for the profit of others*. They probably would never forgive the act of stepping over others for personal gain and never do so themselves either.

At the very least, Sieg believed in them. So she would believe in them as well.

“...There doesn’t seem to be any problem. Then we just need to sign this contract?”

“Yes, please sign it with a drop of your blood as well.”

By combining one’s name and the blood from one’s body, it greatly strengthened the contract. There were also contracts that enforced binding even onto one’s descendants, but this one wasn’t that strong. But that wouldn’t be a problem. The chances that Yggdmillennia would be involved with them for generations were extremely low.

When the gathered homunculi finished signing the contract, Fiore turned to Ruler.

“Now then, may we take care of the matter I mentioned earlier?”

“I don’t mind. Should we start right away?”

“...Yes. I have to do it now, or my resolution will wane later.”

Fiore smiled bitterly—and Caules’ face became grave. Gordes silently left his seat. Even if they were part of the same clan, he wasn’t a magus of the Forvedge family. If he tried to watch what happened next, they would have to kill him.

What Fiore had requested of Ruler was her help in transplanting the Forvedge family’s Magic Crest.

The Magic Crest would be gradually transplanted from Fiore to Caules. Fortunately, Caules had been born as Fiore’s spare. His body had been adjusted since birth so that he could have it transplanted to him at any time should the situation require it.

The problem was that, because the magus whose job it normally was to do the transplant procedure wasn’t present, Fiore had to do the transplant while making necessary adjustments on her own. Moreover, in order for Caules to be acknowledged as the family successor, she had to transplant a very large portion of the Crest to him.

At the very least half of it, or if possible, 70% of it. Naturally, the cost of doing so was great. By halving the Crest she had, Fiore’s prana

stores would drop sharply, and Caules wouldn't be able to handle it satisfactorily for a while after it was transplanted.

But the situation had already surpassed what a Master could singlehandedly deal with. Since the Red camp's only Master was Amakusa Shirou Tokisada, this Holy Grail War now consisted of battle between Servants alone. Therefore, the two siblings were completely meaningless in terms of fighting power.

However, normally a Magic Crest was gradually transplanted from a young age. No matter how much her younger brother Caules' body had been adjusted for the transplant, doing such a large transplant at once naturally came with danger.

Therefore, they had requested that Archer, who was deeply knowledgeable about magecraft, and Ruler, who could use healing to a certain extent, be present during the transplantation.

"...I truly am lucky to be attended by two Servants."

Fiore giggled. Caules sighed and grumbled.

"I didn't think I would suddenly get 70% of it at once..."

"Are you nervous?"

Caules shrugged at Archer's question.

"I only have meager Magic Circuits, after all."

He answered lightly—but from another magus' perspective, it was an event worthy of fainting over. If their parents heard about it, they'd probably be prepared to kill Caules over it.

Frankly speaking, this act was effectively a crime in the eyes of magi. They were going to transfer the family's inheritance to the inferior sibling rather than the superior sibling, after all.

Moreover, it wasn't because the superior sibling was particularly inconvenienced or impaired by something. This was simply in order for her to go from a magus to a normal human.

They used Fiore's room for the Crest transplant ritual. The two siblings lay down together on the bed, closed their eyes, and synchronized their minds. The human mind was tougher and stiffer than people thought. So first they had to start by fusing them.

Ice wouldn't fuse together no matter how much time passed. It had to become water and melt together—and then freeze once more. Naturally, if they failed even one step, two broken down people would be created due to their personalities fusing together.

"Then, please begin the sympathizing process."

Archer of Black spoke quietly.

Even so, Fiore had chosen this. She neither hated the life of a magus that was always adjoined with death, nor did she fear battle, but she had understood that it was impossible for her.

She would never have the kind resolve her younger brother did. No matter how far she strived, she was just a normal person deep down.

—————They melted.

They mingled—————

"Caules. You're going a little too fast. Please calm down."

"I know, but this sensation is just—"

The crystallization of everything their family had cultivated through desperate struggle and battle was suddenly divided in half.

They were instantly attacked by a terrifying feeling of nothingness. Their ancestors whom they had never met severely condemned them with dark faces. *What are you doing!? You siblings have done something unforgivable!*

The older sister cowered, but the younger brother spurred her on.

So what? he spat out. *The one to take responsibility for this is me, not my sister,* he shouted.

It's true this might throw us back by a hundred or two hundred years. So what? I am Forvedge, I am Yggdmillennia.

I won't acknowledge any objections.

"Oh no, his body is reacting to the foreign sensation of the Magic Crest... Ruler, please calm down Caules-dono!"

"Yes, understood! Listen, Caules. Can you hear me? Listen to my words...!"

Hundreds of years' worth of obsession attacked the youngster who brazenly didn't know his place. He saw a ghastly miracle that resembled hell—and he succumbed and fell in love as he witnessed his family's founder who had tried to change from a human into a magus.

He had yearned for magecraft, had loved magecraft and had become inhuman with little effort.

Like a sword, the founder's tenacity pierced the heart of the boy who claimed he would be the next successor. If he let himself throw it up, it would mean exposing his own soul.

But it still felt terribly revolting. His entrails were crushed inside his body as he rode a merry-go-round that endlessly sped up. It rose in his throat—would he feel better if he threw it up?

Just let it out and ease yourself, someone whispered. He thrust his hand into his mouth and tried to drag out the thing in his throat along with his entrails.

"It's all right. —You're all right."

Suddenly, the voice of a holy maiden came down from the heavens.

Instantly, the desert was overturned and became green tracts of land. The refreshing smell of grass immediately caused his urge to vomit to disappear.

The boy kicked his feet off the ground and lightly began to walk.

“...All right. He seems to have calmed down. It’s almost done. Just hold on a little while longer, Master.”

He heard someone’s... gentle voice. He thought its calm tone was appropriate for these grassy plains.

He walked, walked, walked—and arrived.

This was the final part of the Crest. There was nothing new about this place for him, which lay in the memories of his older sister who had been with him since he was young. This was the place where the two siblings had used to play in the past. A perfectly ordinary flower garden near their home.

They had always been together. He had been aware that she would sometimes turn around to confirm his presence. As if to say that being by herself was lonely, that she hated solitude.

That’s why he kept saying “It can’t be helped” to himself and always followed after her.

—It was the younger brother’s duty to follow after his older sister, after all.

He had thought they might be together forever.

He had also thought that they couldn’t be together forever.

When he had gotten dragged into the Great Holy Grail War, he had merely sighed at himself as a magus—but he had thought it was still better than if they were in a normal Holy Grail War.

He had thought they would survive and be together again—but as expected, the girl had ended up having to face herself in this Great Holy Grail War.

Having grown up, she made a choice. It was a cruel choice that no one else would ever understand.

But the younger brother was happy just by the fact that she had made a choice.

So it was fine.

“...Hmm?”

It was a scene he was familiar with, but there was one irregularity within it.

The girl noticed her younger brother, and walked up to him while waving her hand. In her hand was a leash, and attached to it was a sluggish dog.

The dog wagged its tail and went to greet the boy... *I see*, the boy thought as he suddenly understood. The reason the girl had never given up magecraft lay there.

She couldn't let it be in vain. She didn't want to let it be in vain. She had to at least scoop up and make up for the life that had been used and discarded—

That's why Fiore Forvedge Yggdmillennia had continued to live as a magus.

“...But that's also over now.”

She gave a lonely smile and hesitated to let go of the leash. Picking up on her actions, the old dog began to leisurely chew the leash.

“It isn't over, Nee-chan. I'm inheriting it.”

In the blink of an eye, he took the leash from her. As the girl watched him in surprise, the boy spoke.

“I'm inheriting it, so I'll also inherit this guy too. He won't be forgotten. I was there back then too. I also saw and watched.”

He had known. He had been resolved. He had known that his father would *use* the dog back then.

And while knowing that, he had watched and let it happen. He had tried not to feel anything for the dog as much as possible and did his best to ignore its existence.

But even if he ignored the dog, he couldn't ignore his sister. That day, he had watched the dog wagging its tail at his sister. As neither his sister nor the dog had any suspicions about what lay in the future—all he'd been able to do was shed tears at that scene.

So the boy had a responsibility to take charge of this leash.

"You'll take responsibility and keep hold of it?"

"...Yeah, I will."

The girl smiled and entrusted the rest to the boy. The old dog wagged its tail in a very slow-witted manner.

He would receive and inherit it.

He would inherit her magecraft, this discarded life and her pride. The divided Magic Crest might be too much for the boy's hands. But he would never fear or regret it.

That scene all those years ago. As long as he kept it carved in his mind—he would discipline himself as a magus of the Forvedge family and Yggdmillennia.

The illusion ended, and Caules groaned at the sensation of something cold having been inserted in his brain.

"Are you all right?"

Ruler peered down at him anxiously. Caules calmed down his heated and cloudy thoughts and nodded at the question.

"Ye—Yeah, I think I'm fine."

His awareness of reality was gradually being restored. He moved his limbs, and felt the strong sensation of something foreign in his body. His movements were slow and dull as if his joints were clogged with mud.

"Are you all right, Caules-dono? ...Let alone 70%, you received a full

80% of the Magic Crest from my Master. Your sister might feel more comfortable as the one who gave it away, but it must be painful for you as the one who received it.”

“...Not really. It isn’t all that much.”

Well, it was, but—when he thought that his older sister had endured this kind of pain for such a long time, he felt he had to put up with it at any cost.

“Magus-kun. Please use this.”

After saying that, Ruler tightly wrapped a cloth around his chest. That alone immediately eased the pain. Moving was still troublesome, but he had recovered enough to get off the bed and walk.

“It’s a holy shroud. I prepared it just in case, but it’s better for you to use it now. It will also grant you resistance against impurities such as curses or poison, so I don’t mind if you keep it on for a while.”

“...The pain has gone down a lot. Thank you, Ruler.”

Ruler smiled slightly at those words.

“You did splendidly, Caules Forvedge Yggdmillennia. And you as well, Fiore.”

As Archer helped her sit up, Fiore shook her head and smiled feebly.

“No, not at all. All the praise should go to Caules right now. He’s my younger brother who I’m very proud of, after all.”

Caules turned red at those words and put his hand over mouth as his lips reflexively slackened into a smile.

“Hmm, so that’s why you left later than us.”

Having changed into pajamas he had shrewdly bought before coming here, Rider of Black grinned at Ruler who was laying her head on a desk.

“...”

Ruler remained silent. *Looks like she still hasn’t recovered from the shock*, Sieg judged. Well, that was understandable. It was understandable, but—

“...Couldn’t you tell by looking at him normally when clothed?”

Ruler jumped up at Sieg’s question. Her eyes were slightly teary and she was red from her cheeks to her ears.

“I couldn’t tell!!”

She was already embarrassed from seeing Rider naked, but her shame seemed to be worsened by the fact that she was the one who stepped into that situation herself.

“But can’t you confirm the true names and stats of other Servants as Ruler?”

While gripping her head, Ruler pointed at the helplessly laughing Rider.

“Sieg-kun... Try confirming Rider of Black’s stats. As a Master, you should be able to grasp to a certain extent the abilities of the Servants you have met until now just by concentrating a little.”

“...Hmm.”

Having been told that, Sieg tried confirming Rider’s stats. A book appeared in his mind. He turned the pages, and the stats of the Servants he had met appeared vaguely one after another.

Saber, Archer, Lancer and finally Rider...

“...What the heck is this?”

Sieg turned to look at Rider sitting next to him—and Rider waved his hand with a wide smile.

Rider’s stats page was a mess. All of his skill names and ranks were properly recorded, but there were little jokes added everywhere.

In particular, his gender entry was completely painted over and impossible to read. Sieg frantically checked the stats of the other Servants, but fortunately there wasn’t anything particularly strange about them.

“...It’s true that there are Servants who possesses techniques or Noble Phantasms to hide their skills. But adding in little jokes is unheard of... Just how on earth is he doing this...? No, leaving aside the means,

normally people wouldn't do something that like... geez..."

That's true, Sieg thought in agreement. As they both looked at Rider, the Servant in question answered while smiling embarrassedly.

"Hmm, it's probably that. You know, the tome I have! The ability to check stats is technically a kind of spell, right? It's a spell that conforms with the fundamental rules of the Holy Grail War, so it can't be blocked completely, but the book might be able to interfere with it a little."

"How half-hearted and irresponsible... Really now..."

Ruler gripped her head. *That's understandable*, Sieg thought. Though he decided to leave it be, since it didn't do any great harm.

"So, are you still unable to remember the book's true name?"

"Hmm... it's starting to trickle back into my head a little, I think."

What a careless answer. But Sieg didn't particularly think to scold him. Because he believed that his Servant, Rider, would always come through when push came to shove.

"Will you remember in three days?"

"It'll, probably, be fine, I'd like to think... I think."

Rider averted his eyes to Ruler's question.

"Rider. The enemy will actively attack us as we approach the Hanging Gardens. Assassin will attack with her spells from the Hanging Gardens, Rider will fly through the air with his chariot and Archer will naturally shoot us with her arrows. Even if we fall at high speed, we Servants might not die, but—"

It didn't need saying, but Sieg would definitely die if he fell from that height.

"I get it! It'll be fine, leave it to me!"

"...I feel uneasy."

"Ruler. You don't have to worry about Rider."

"Haah..."

Though she seemed somewhat uneasy at Sieg's words, Ruler consented.

"So, are you okay, Sieg-kun?"

Silence. Rider, who didn't know about the case with Assassin of Black, stared at his Master's face curiously. He tilted his head in puzzlement at Sieg's expression. His face was wracked by unbelievable distress.

"Master...?"

"...There's no problem. I chose to fight."

Sieg somehow managed to reply. Yes, he wasn't fighting for someone else. He had chosen. He had willingly thrown himself into this battle he got dragged into.

He was fighting for himself. Not for humans.

"I'm going to take a bath, then go to sleep."

After saying that, Sieg got up from his chair. Rider and Ruler silently watched—and once they confirmed he had entered the washroom, they looked at each other.

"He seems to be smoldering over something. Do you know anything, Rider?"

"...Yeah. Actually, at lunch, we ran into Saber of Red. But I didn't hear anything concrete about the hell my Master spoke of."

Ruler explained in detail about the illusion that Assassin of Black had shown them. The fixed system of a city where humans killed humans and stole everything there was to be had. A hell reproduced by humans where no one was evil and no one was good.

"I see..."

Rider of Black looked down with a sad expression. Naturally, as a hero who had wandered the world, Rider knew that such things inevitably existed in the world—and he accepted it.

That was the inevitably disillusioned viewpoint of a hero. Those who couldn't be saved just couldn't be saved, and the weak would bare their fangs as the weak. The malignancy of systems established by various circumstances such as social position and wealth couldn't be taken down no matter how great a hero one was.

“But he would have to learn about it eventually. Besides, it’s not like Master wants to become human, right?”

“Yes. Even so, don’t you think he felt longing towards humans?”

Rider crossed his arms and shook his head fervently.

“I wonder about that... Master wished to live. And that wish was granted in a slightly strange and twisted form. Even so, I don’t think... he feels longing towards humans. In the first place, has Master met any humans besides magi?”

“He was treated to lunch by an old man named Serge. He was a very good person.”

“Enough that Master would feeling longing?”

“...We didn’t meet him for that long. It might have made him aware that there are a good people out there, though.”

There was no clue as to how he felt. Sieg himself probably still didn’t know how he felt yet.

“It’d be nice if he came to like them, though.”

“You mean humans?”

“Yes... Otherwise, it’d be troubling for me.”

Suddenly, she muttered in a tone filled with an unusual emotion. Picking up on it with his sharp ears, Rider leaned forward over the desk with plain curiosity and wariness.

“Mu, mu, mu... And why would that trouble you?”

“Eh? Ah, no, err, sorry. It’s nothing!”

Ruler covered her mouth and quite obviously fell into a panic. Becoming even more suspicious, Rider brought his face close to her—and Ruler hurriedly averted her eyes.

“Are you hiding something?”

“I-I’m not hiding anything. Really.”

She wouldn’t look him in the eye.

“You would you swear it by God?”

"I-It'd be rude to swear on the Lord for such a trivial thing..."

Her earlier gallantness had disappeared, and Ruler blushed shyly like a normal girl her age. Conceding that touching upon this subject any further would be pitiful for her, Rider shrugged and changed the topic.

"...Well, I also agree that I want him to like humans, though. After all, Master has a future!"

"That's... right. I think it'd be nice if he had a happy future ahead of him."

Ruler spoke happily and smiled innocently. Rider also nodded cheerily.

Suddenly, Ruler, while making sure that Sieg still wasn't coming back yet, whispered to Rider.

"...U-Umm. Rider-san, do you like Sieg-san?"

"How about you?"

Having the question immediately turned back to her, Ruler widened her eyes and stiffened her back straight.

"T-That's. Umm, err, that is, no—"

Rider sighed. He stood up and patted Ruler's head as if she were a child.

"Hyah!?"

Rider smiled and whispered in her ear.

"—Well, do your best, though I won't be supporting you, Miss *someone else* who isn't Ruler."

"...!"

As the girl turned around, Rider waved his hand and went up to the bedroom on the second floor.

"...Uuugh. He noticed."

She sighed and pressed a hand to her cheek. Sieg then came out of the washroom with a bath towel covering his head and noticed Ruler looking red-faced and laying her head on the desk, so he called out to her.

“Ruler, did something happen?”

“Ah, no, no, no! Nothing happened, nothing—”

She stiffened once again. While looking at her curiously, Sieg pointed at the washroom.

“We changed the order, but you can go in the bath next.”

Ruler stiffened and stared at Sieg’s body. A shirt was hanging off his right arm. He probably intended to sleep wearing it. In other words, right now, Sieg was completely naked above his waist.

“...Y-Yes! Under! Stood!”

Moving jerkily just like a mechanical doll, she passed by Sieg to go to the washroom.

As he watched her go, Sieg found her behavior odd, but he just shrugged and decided to go up to the second floor bedroom. *It’d be nice if Rider doesn’t barge in like last time*, he thought. After all, Rider stayed in physical form and tossed and turned while he slept, which caused Sieg to be often kicked off the narrow bed.

I pray in the morning, I pray at noon, I pray at night, I pray before eating and I pray before I go to sleep.

—In other words, my way of life is simple. Every day is suffocating.

My friends at the school dormitory take things easy in their lives. I have no intention of condemning that, and I myself have thought that it might be better to take it easy sometimes. The reason I could never do that despite thinking that way—is probably because I was afraid of agitating my heart.

Every day was like living at the bottom of the ocean. With neither great joy nor sorrow, I simply went through the days dispassionately.

The school I attend has nothing noteworthy about it. My friends idly grumble that it’s like a prison. Still, it’s not like it’s completely cut off from the outside world, so it’s easy to both fall into depravity and repent for it.

Amidst that environment, I was often told that I strictly disciplined myself.

I didn't have relationships outside or fall into depraved behavior, but neither did I try to change others out of excessive pride. My teachers and friends praised me, for some reason.

Everyone said that this way of life was beautiful, that this way of life was correct. I always accepted those praises with a vague smile, while feeling troubled inside my heart. It isn't anything that great.

I'm simply afraid to change.

I understand my personality very well. My self-control is weak and my brakes are easily broken, so if I start running, I would just keep speeding up, unable to stop.

Even if there was a cliff ahead, I would just jump off it. I wouldn't stop until I fell and died.

That's why I didn't concern myself with the outside world, but also didn't feel any great joy in that prison. Furthermore, I couldn't sever my connection to the outside completely as long as I had my parents.

It makes me want to deride myself for how half-baked I am.

I didn't intend to become someone extremely commonplace, someone who was connected with others and dyed by the earthly world.

And I didn't have the courage to devote myself to a world cut off from the outside and where taboos are strictly controlled.

Frankly, I didn't know where I should aim to go. I couldn't find the path I should take. I just walked uncertainly and helplessly down the path I could vaguely manage to see.

Screw it, if it's like this, who cares anymore? I half-despaired as I walked.

I didn't know what lay ahead, so I had no other choice. Even if I fell and degenerated, even if I my body became a captive, even if I regretted it... I had no other choice, or so I told myself.

At that time—I saw a dream, and I saw a path.

The holy maiden Jeanne d'Arc asked for my help. I understood everything from the knowledge that had been inserted into me, and accepted it. Naturally, I was afraid. A mortal battle between heroes over the Holy Grail wasn't something someone commonplace like me should involve myself in.

But I agreed. I also politely refused the holy maiden's advice to simply sleep, and I continued to watch everything through her eyes.

Grand battles that surpassed my imagination, gruesome scenes that filled me with such disgust I wanted to throw up, all of it.

I probably felt mentally protected by the thought I was in a place of safety. I watched events that no one else would ever see in their whole lifetime.

I saw heroes who dashed across the battlefield, heroes who could smash giant stone statues with mystical tools, magi who used mysterious magecraft, divine-looking giants and even a massive fortress floating in the sky.

But what captivated my eyes the most was—was...

How is such a pure and beautiful being alive and breathing? That person was so beautiful it made me think that.

The boy who was a homunculus, an artificially-created life form.

I understood from the knowledge the holy maiden had given me. Most of them were short-lived, loyal servants who were created in human form and obeyed the will of humans.

But he had defied death and overcome despair, obtaining irreplaceable freedom. Even the moment where I thought *Thank goodness* and sighed in relief was only brief, as he sought to return to the battlefield.

I couldn't understand. After all, that meant throwing away the freedom he had obtained.

If it were me, I would definitely hold onto what I had obtained—I would never let it go. He had risked his life to get it.

But he said this.

My comrades want to be saved. I can't just leave and abandon them.

Even I could understand. This person probably can't do anything. Certainly, he might regret leaving them. He might feel guilty over abandoning them.

But he would surely forget it eventually. He should live happily — this person had to live happily. The world was huge and filled with tons of beautiful things, after all.

If he could do something, then it would be understandable. But he knew better than anyone else that he 'couldn't do anything'. He knew full well that it was a foolish, reckless and futile choice that wouldn't amount to anything.

But this person had chosen to go back.

To me, as someone who lived half-heartedly, his way of life was overwhelmingly dazzling.

A jewel that was polished not to boast of its beauty nor make others look at it, but simply for the sake of doing so. A person who would never change his way of life no matter how he was scorned as foolish for not taking pride in his beauty.

Even though he's close enough for me to touch if I just reach out my hand.

To me, he's the person who was the furthest away.

Soaking in the warm bath water made her weariness disappear as if it was melting away. The girl known as Laetitia heaved a huge sigh. She felt like it had been a while since she had soaked in the bath like this.

"—Umm. I'm sorry."

The girl who had come to the surface apologized to the holy maiden within her.

"I don't think there's any need for you to apologize, though."

“...No, umm... I don’t really understand it myself either... these feelings of mine.”

These feelings are so strange, she thought with a sigh.

Shame and joy were mixed together. And a large spoonful of sorrow was mixed into it as well.

“Isn’t that—because he hasn’t noticed you?”

That was naturally part of it. But there was something else subtly mixed into it. Something slightly bitter, sweet and painful.

“Laetitia. You know there’s nothing stopping you from letting him know when you come out, right?”

“...No. I’ll refrain from doing that.”

She moved her hand through the bath water. She felt sad over not revealing her name to him, and she also felt sad that he wasn’t looking at her. But this subtle emotion surely came from something else.

—Ah, how sinful I am.

“I’m already fine with this... My feelings are vague and ambiguous, after all.”

“But—”

“Thank you, o great holy maiden. It made me happy.”

She closed her eyes—and then reopened them. The girl known as Jeanne confirmed that Laetitia had gone to sleep inside her.

“So that’s enough for you... huh?”

They had two days remaining due to Fiore’s choice. As long as there was no emergency situation, Ruler had thought it would be fine to lend her body back to Laetitia.

Laetitia had done that much for her. She had loaned Jeanne this body. Even when they got involved in bloody battles, she continued to accompany Jeanne. Even if she was technically safe, merely continuing to watch battles from inside Jeanne should have mentally exhausted her.

Jeanne couldn't thank her enough. After all, this state where she was close to being human had from the start been far more astounding than she had expected.

She felt hunger and felt joy in eating. She felt weariness and wished for sleep. The overwhelming euphoria just from having basic, human instincts. She was once more experiencing the magnificence of being alive.

If it weren't for Laetitia, she wouldn't have been able to feel this... Though naturally, she wouldn't have suffered from hunger, either.

That's right. That's why Jeanne felt an everlasting debt of gratitude to her. And most of all, she felt it was only natural that she was charmed by the boy beside her, even if they had only known each other for a few days. So why not change places and give her the chance to form and bond with him even a little—that's what she had thought, but...

"How... unfortunate."

Perhaps because of the steam, her vision was hazy and the world was so vague and unclear. Yes, it was unfortunate. Sieg still hadn't noticed Laetitia. Jeanne felt it was unfortunate and sad, but also just a little—

"...No, I..."

Ever so slightly, completely different feelings were mixed in. They were feelings that were superfluous and absolutely unneeded, which she should discard right away.

But she couldn't throw these feelings away no matter how hard she tried. Even though they were so tiny and should have been unnecessary.

"I don't understand... anything."

Whiling hoping her feelings would dissolve into steam and disappear—Ruler looked up at the ceiling and heaved a huge sigh.

CHAPTER 2 END

Chapter 3

...For the next two days after that, everything was peaceful. Staying inside the hideout would let them avoid unnecessary trouble, so Sieg wanted to spend time there idly—and ponder a vague thought he still couldn't quite put into words.

But his Servant wouldn't allow that.

"Come on, let's go out and play!"

"Wait, what are you saying—!?"

And the holy maiden's attempt at restraint was meaningless in the face of Rider. Rider of Black pulled them both along with him to his heart's content.

They marched through the town and ate, went around the many famous tourist sites, and talked and laughed without minding the suspicious gazes of those they passed. Whenever they occasionally encountered trouble, Rider and Ruler dealt with it. Irritated people would smile wryly when the flawlessly cute Rider talked to them, and those who with ill intentions would run away hanging their heads after hearing Ruler's reprimanding tone and words.

Sieg felt as if he was walking with a typhoon and an angel. It felt extremely safe, but also extremely tiring.

But he was only tired. And that weariness itself was extremely comforting.

“—Are you having fun?”

Rider asked him that, taking Sieg by surprise. For some reason, Ruler also stared intently at Sieg as if waiting for his answer.

Sieg replied.

“Of course I’m having fun.”

It was true that he felt a slight amount of smoldering impatience inside. He was anxious about the future, and dark clouds hanged over their destination. Naturally, he hadn’t forgotten about any of that. He hadn’t, but—

The sunlight was dazzling, the sky was clear and blue, and the people passing by were overflowing with energy and liveliness, for good or ill.

Just walking through such a place made his heart pound with excitement.

Sieg smiled, and Rider and Ruler nodded in satisfaction.

He didn’t know the reason for their reaction. Even when he asked why, the other two merely traded looks and giggled... *It’s surely something good*, Sieg thought.

—When it became nighttime, Sieg thought.

He wracked his brain over difficult questions over things he didn’t have an answer for, like human goodness, human evil and human instinct. He read books and sought the guidance of the other two people with him, but even with that, he still wracked his brains over the answers he couldn’t find.

And he also thought about Amakusa Shirou Tokisada.

“...Why is he trying to save humanity?”

Sieg suddenly murmured that while reading a book on a sofa in the living room.

“Hmm? Isn’t that because humans are sinful beings to him?”

Rider answered as if it were extremely obvious.

It was a simple answer, but Sieg also thought it was correct. Humans were sinful beings by nature, and that was precisely the reason Shirou was trying to save humanity. Though Sieg didn't know how he intended to use the Greater Grail to bring it about—in any case, Shirou was filled with the sense of duty that he must save the sinful humanity.

“Then does Amakusa Shirou hate humans?”

“I don't think so, though?”

While lying down on another sofa, Rider pointed at the book on Amakusa Shirou that Sieg had been absorbed in reading. It was a book he had brought from the Fortress of Millennia, thinking it might be useful somehow. Though Sieg had been bestowed knowledge about the other Servants, he wouldn't be able to understand what kind of person the enemy's leader was unless he tried to learn about him.

...If it was just a matter of fighting, there might not be a problem with not knowing. If he changed into the great hero Siegfried, he could probably defeat Amakusa Shirou Tokisada, who, in the end, was merely a saint from the Far East, in one blow.

But Sieg somehow felt that was wrong. Regardless of which side defeated the other, Sieg wanted to at least know about his opponent. Even if he could understand or agree with them, he should be aware of their existence and objectively know about their life.

Pulling the trigger to kill the enemy without knowing anything about them or their goal—Sieg felt that that alone was something he shouldn't do.

Therefore, though it was only vague details, he had learned about Amakusa Shirou Tokisada. And the more he learned, the less he understood.

If he was summoned as a normal Servant, then Sieg could understand. Even when he was summoned as Ruler, there probably hadn't been any problems when it had been in the Far East.

According to the research of the Yggdmillennia magi, the Third Holy Grail War had apparently been extremely gruesome.

The armies of supposedly allied countries each moved secretly amidst the war along with the many participating magi — and by the time anyone realized it, it had developed into a massacre that no one could control.

In his first life, Amakusa Shirou Tokisada had witnessed the massacre of thirty-seven thousand people, and in his second life, he saw the hideous conflict between magi and armies.

“Shouldn’t it be impossible for him to like humans after that—?”

“...I don’t think so.”

Ruler suddenly spoke up from her own sofa where she sat. Rider and Sieg looked at her. Ruler murmured as if she were speaking to herself instead of them.

“If you live as a hero or a saint, you will naturally see both the ugly and beautiful sides of humans. Human evil, human goodness, or perhaps something that transcends either of them. No matter how much of the ugliness he saw, he wants to believe in the beautiful things. It’s precisely because he *wants to continue liking humans* that he wants to save them — that might be how he thinks.”

“...I see.”

That’s a reasonable conclusion, Sieg thought. But Rider objected while wriggling his feet on the sofa.

“But would he reach the conclusion of ‘saving humanity’ in that case? Hmm... like, wouldn’t he wish something like erasing bad humans and leaving only good humans?”

“That isn’t salvation, but selection. No saint or hero has the right to choose who should and shouldn’t be saved.”

Sieg tilted his head curiously at Ruler’s words.

“But you yourself fought in the past, didn’t you? In order to protect your homeland and defeat the enemy. Isn’t that selecting the people who should be saved?”

“...Yes, that’s true. I don’t think that was mistaken. But even if it wasn’t mistaken, my actions were a ‘sin’. I didn’t think of myself as a saint; I’m merely a commonplace woman who heard God’s laments.”

Therefore, that wasn't selection, but a choice. She had decided to save *these people* and destroy *those people*. That was the nature of how humans saved other humans.

One must never classify those who should be saved and those who shouldn't from high above.

"Shirou Kotomine—Amakusa Shirou Tokisada should also understand that. He obtained the Greater Grail not for the sake of saving only those who should be saved, but to save all humans. However, that is a mistake. That's precisely why I'm here."

"A mistake... huh? Then, if it wasn't a mistake, you would also choose that salvation of his?"

Ruler stiffened at Sieg's question. The coffee cup in her hand trembled slightly.

"...Ruler?"

Hearing Sieg's curious voice, Ruler frantically shook her head.

"N-No. It's nothing... Yes, I think I would consider it if that salvation was perfect. But there is no such thing."

"Right? It's impossible! If there were such a thing, some much wiser guys in the past would have already done it! Living beings can't live just being saved by others!"

"...Then does that apply to me who was saved by you?"

Rider glared at Sieg after he spoke.

"Geez! That's not it! You weren't saved. *You simply saved yourself!* I just helped a little! To reverse the question, would you have thought of escaping by yourself if you had known that you would eventually be saved?"

Sieg became at a loss for words.

...If he had known he would be saved for a fact, would he really have fought so desperately?

If he had known that someone would save him if he just waited—

“—That’s right. It’s certainly true that you were saved by Rider of Black, Sieg-kun. But when you consider the process until he did so, you were the one who saved yourself first. You shouldn’t disregard that.”

Sieg felt an emotion that was really hard to describe after hearing Ruler’s words. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling, but some odd emotion that mixed happiness and shame and tickled his heart somehow. Though he understood it was ‘embarrassment’, Sieg still took a little while to respond.

“...Is that so?”

“It is, it is.”

While saying that, Rider picked up some Yakigashi¹.

“Oh, strawberry. What luck!”

“Muu. Rider, haven’t you been eating nothing but the strawberry-flavored ones since earlier?”

Ruler glared at him. The sweets that she had bought along with coffee so they could enjoy it together were drastically decreasing in the strawberry-flavored ones due to Rider’s very specific eating preferences.

“I’m just randomly grabbing from the pile... Oh, another strawberry.”

“A-Aren’t they all gone now!? Rider, you! Gluttony is a grave sin!”

“I-It’s fine! The chocolate ones are also tasty! I’m going to bed, good night!”

Perhaps sensing his disadvantage here, Rider suddenly went into spiritual form and ran away.

“Geez...”

While watching all this, Sieg grabbed one of the chocolate-flavored sweets. Putting his dulled sense of taste to work, he managed to taste the chocolate.

“I think it’s plenty tasty.”

“Yes...”

1. Yakigashi: Japanese baked sweets.

He threw one of the sweets to her as she acted downhearted. When she ate it, Ruler's cheeks loosened into a happy smile.

"Ah, it's like I'm falling into decadence..."

"...I think you've already plenty falling into decadence when it comes to eating, though. No, sorry. That was a slip of the tongue."

When Sieg reflexively pointed that out, Ruler pouted.

"This is a unique form of summoning for me, so it can't be helped. Besides, my calorie consumption is quite fierce, so she doesn't have to worry about getting fat either."

"She? ...Ah, you mean Laetitia."

Ruler—Jeanne d'Arc—had been summoned using the girl known as Laetitia as a core.

"Yes. She's a very good girl."

The instant the topic turned to Laetitia, Ruler's expression relaxed.

"I would think so. Even if she isn't fighting, she has the necessary character to follow you into this situation."

"Yes. Though she seems to have become interested in something else—"

Ruler smiled in amusement. Something else... Certainly, amidst the unbelievable fantasies of the Great Holy Grail War, magecraft and most of all Servants, an ordinary person could easily become interested in any of them.

"Ah, I know. You're surely misunderstanding, Sieg-kun."

"...Did you read my mind?"

Sieg tilted his head in confusion, making Ruler smile all the more.

"Yes. After all, what she's become charmed by is—!?"

Before she could say any more, Ruler covered her mouth with her own hands.

"What's wrong?"

"N-No. It's nothing. More importantly, Sieg-kun, would you like to talk with Laeticia? We're not in a pressing situation right now, after all."

Sieg tilted his head curiously at Ruler's question. Even if she asked if he would like to talk, it would actually be his first time meeting her.

"I felt like she kept her distance when I first met you, but is it all right to talk with her?"

He didn't mind being hated, but he wouldn't force someone who hated him to talk—so Sieg tried to be considerate of Laeticia.

"It's fine!"

—Ruler suddenly stood up and shouted loudly. Sieg stared at her in puzzlement, and Ruler covered her mouth with a shocked expression.

Silence. After a while, Ruler sat back down on the sofa.

"...Could it be that you're *Laeticia*?"

When Sieg asked that, she tried to feebly shake her head—but then nodded.

Her expression was somehow helpless, unable to calm down. The way she anxiously clenched her hands was certainly like that of an ordinary girl that could be found anywhere.

"Umm, yes. That's right, I'm... Laeticia."

"Nice to meet you, sort of, I guess."

Laeticia smiled and nodded at Sieg's words. Her smile seemed a bit sad to Sieg.

"Yes, nice to meet you, Sieg-san. I'm truly glad to have gotten the chance to properly meet you. I've only watched you up until now, after all."

"I see. Umm... are you all right with me? Sorry, that was vague. Err..."

Laeticia giggled and nodded at Sieg's ambiguous question.

"No, it's not a problem. It's just that, how to put it... I was nervous before. It's fine now. I've been watching Sieg-san for a while."

She displayed a soft smile that was slightly different from that of

Ruler—even though their facial features were exactly the same, the atmosphere they gave off was clearly different from each other.

“Then that’s good... But you’ve really gotten dragged into something serious.”

Someone who lived a normal life had suddenly been possessed by a saint one day. Moreover, she got involved in a war over the Holy Grail and witnessed cruelty that one normally wouldn’t be able to endure seeing.

Even if she could simply put her mind to sleep inside, there were probably times when she saw things she didn’t want to see.

“The holy maiden Jeanne-sama treats me very preciously. Besides, truth be told, my heart is dancing with excitement a little as well.”

“Your heart is... dancing?”

Sieg tilted his head curiously, and Laetitia nodded.

“Umm, I realize it’s imprudent of me—but, I was someone who didn’t know about magecraft or anything really until now. If Jeanne-sama hadn’t descended upon me, I probably would have lived my entire life without knowing any of it.”

She clasped her hands together as if in prayer and continued to speak.

“But I was able to learn through this experience. I’ve met heroes who are only told of in myths and legends face to face. Whether they be enemies or allies, it’s all been a precious experience for someone ordinary like me. And I also, umm, got to meet... you too, Sieg-san.”

“...It’s true that homunculi are a rare sight.”

After some thought, Sieg nodded in understanding—and Laetitia’s became downcast at those words.

“It’s not because you’re a homunculus. It’s because you’re Sieg-san.”

“...Hmm.”

Sieg tilted his head. His reaction, which could only be described as naivety itself, showed how he just didn’t understand.

Laeticia thought.

This person dispassionately assessed his ‘personal’ value to a frightening degree. He was a Master, the Servant Saber of Black, and a homunculus that could use magecraft. And he probably thought he was nothing else besides those things.

He treated his kindness towards others, his bravery which didn’t lose to that of heroes and everything else about him—as non-existent. He thought it was natural for anyone to have those qualities.

Laeticia found that unbearably sad.

“...Umm, Ruler... No, Laeticia.”

Laeticia raised her face. Sieg stared at Laeticia with a serious gaze. He straightened his back and looked straight at her.

“Did I say something rude to you?”

“Huh? Umm, why do you think that—?”

“No, it’s just that you were looking at me sadly. Ruler would probably correct me or get angry if I did something rude. But right now you’re Laeticia. I thought you might get sad instead in such a case, but is that wrong?”

So it’s like that, Laeticia thought. She became saddened again, but immediately understood.

In the end, this was something that had to be conveyed with words. Because Sieg couldn’t see that which anyone could naturally understand or boast of in the depths of their hearts.

This might be her best chance.

Be brave, she reprimanded herself.

If she didn’t say it here, she might never get to say it—Laeticia hated the thought of that.

“No, that’s not it. I... That’s right, I simply don’t want you to make light of yourself, Sieg-san. Umm, I’ll only say it once, okay?”

“Sure.”

Laeticia sucked in a deep breath, leaned forward and spoke to Sieg.

“Sieg-san, even without being a Master, Servant or magus, you are a truly wonderful person just for being *yourself*.”

Those words left Sieg with a dumbfounded expression for a little while. Laeticia nodded in satisfaction and then quietly closed her eyes—

“—I also think so, Sieg-kun. And I pray that you’ll eventually think of yourself that way as well.”

Ruler lightly patted his hand. Completely dumbfounded, Sieg nodded vaguely. Ruler hoped that Laeticia’s words would act as some kind of impetus and help him understand little by little.

“I—”

Sieg couldn’t continue his sentence.

He questioned the world, he questioned humans and he questioned good and evil. But he still hadn’t questioned *himself*. If he continued questioning the world while remaining empty inside—he would probably one day conclude that he was a worthless being.

The value of his life wasn’t something to be decided by others; he had to decide it for himself. And when he acknowledged his own value, it would help form the path Sieg would walk.

Ruler wanted to believe that. She wanted to protect him. Even if they wouldn’t walk alongside each other, if she could at least help him find his path—

“...”

She was hit by a headache similar to vertigo. *You have no right to speak of dreams*, a voice growled inside her mind.

You brought him here—you led this homunculus to the battlefield as if it were completely natural. By the Lord’s will.

“Ruler, what’s wrong?”

Sieg asked her worriedly, and Ruler frantically shook her head.

"It's nothing," she answered, and Sieg then fell into deep thought once again. Watching that, Ruler thought once more.

—I certainly brought him here.

She didn't know what would happen next. But she had a responsibility. Ruler bore responsibility for not having made him run away.

As such, she would continue to protect him... even if she had to wager her own life to do so.

As she swore that within her heart, Ruler felt relieved. She could wager her life for him. She felt relieved at that part of herself.

There was one thing that she didn't notice... These feelings that seemed to burn her body from the inside out consisted of not just guilt.

Laetitia found that sad. Even if she pointed it out to her with words, the holy maiden probably wouldn't acknowledge it. And by the time she did acknowledge it, it likely would be far too late.

Thus, the final night would end with everyone passing their time peacefully.

—The night wore on.

Archer of Black clenched a fist and raised it towards the starry sky above.

He wasn't thinking of his coming opponent as his former student. The enemy was a great and matchless hero, the strongest warrior Achilles, who ran across the battlefield over the course of the Trojan War—

His heart cheered. And at the same time, he resolved himself. There was no proof he could win even if he fought Achilles in perfect form. When he considered it coolly, Archer was at a 7:3 disadvantage. Achilles' spear was certainly swift. Even if Archer completely grasped his abilities and habits in battle, the possibility that he couldn't process the data fast

enough in real time was extremely likely.

Moreover, that was based on the assumption of first annulling the disadvantage of his foothold and his opponent not using his chariot.

To bring about such a convenient development, considerable luck and planning was necessary.

But that was precisely why Archer engraved the fact that he had to win in his heart. Because victory was the final lesson he could teach to his Master.

How strange, he thought with a smile. He would never have thought he would pass the final night feeling so calm. Only one pair could win in a normal Holy Grail War.

In such a situation where it would be natural for him to die amidst regret, he was lucky to have fortuitously met so many comrades—unbelievably so.

We'll definitely win.

With his heart full of overflowing feelings, Archer of Black reflected upon that simple conclusion.

—The night wore on.

Rider of Black slept. He slept regardless of the fact that he was a Servant. He fell asleep despite not needing to. And he saw a dream.

Naturally, it was a dream of his Master.

...However, Sieg's life was so short and condensed it was only a fleeting twinkle. The first person he met soon after being born was none other than Rider of Black himself.

And so, Rider met himself as he watched Sieg's past.

He felt Sieg's feelings and thoughts as he watched. He experienced just how happy Sieg had felt when Rider appeared—and said he would save him.

Ah, I'll protect you, I'll protect you, I'll protect you, I want you to become happy!

Rider's heart danced. Rider had forgotten that they would part soon... or rather, he blocked it off from his thoughts. He understood. It would surely be painful and sad.

If Rider could physically incarnate, he would be able to stay by Sieg's side, but that was quite difficult. Whether or not they managed to get back the Greater Grail, there was no telling whether it would be able to grant a wish at that point.

But, he could vaguely tell—it was already too late for that. His instincts were quite reliable at times like these.

So, for now, let's only think of fun things. I'll do my best as a Servant. Rider thus swore.

His chest was hot and his head swirled with formless thoughts, and that was why he could understand as he became unbearably excited.

He would fight with his life on the line for his Master. He couldn't help but feel happy about that.

As he surrendered himself to sleep, Rider of Black's lips slackened into a slight smile.

—The night wore on.

It was late at night. Unable to sleep, Caules absentmindedly gazed at the courtyard outside from his window. His human eyes could only faintly make out the contour of things in the darkness at best. But he managed to make out the silhouette of the rubble that hadn't yet been cleaned up outside.

Caules had often watched his Servant from here. She had usually followed him everywhere from behind, but the only independent action she took was flower picking in the courtyard.

Though it was only a few days ago, it felt nostalgic to him, and he hated himself for feeling that way.

At the same time, he was surprised at how clearly he recalled that scene. Within their scarce conversations, Caules had only once asked Berserker of Black a certain question.



"I thought you would have hated flowers?"

She had tilted her head, as if not comprehending what he had said. Caules had smiled bitterly—perhaps that was only natural. The episode about her throwing flowers into a lake was only a fictional production from a movie.

When he apologized and told her to forget about it, Berserker had nodded and began engrossing herself in flower fortune-telling once more. Holding the peeled petals in her hands, she then stood up and threw them up towards the sky.

The flower petals had danced downwards on a gentle breeze.

It only lasted an instant—but that scene was vividly engraved in his mind. She had seemed unbearably ephemeral as she stood there amidst the falling petals.

He should have talked with her a bit more. Anything would have been fine, about the things they each liked, the things they each hated; he should have talked with her about anything without reserve. Even if she couldn't exchange words, she should have been able to convey something in her own way.

But she was no longer here. Caules had let her die in a manner that was the same as if he had killed her with his own hands.

The piece of rubble that was stabbed into the ground of the flowerbed couldn't help but look like some kind of gravestone to him. And then his thoughts began to turn into an even worse direction.

"Idiot, stop it."

He knocked his head. He didn't have the time to be soaking in sentimentality. Everything would end tomorrow night. He didn't even know whether he would be alive then.

But—he still had a responsibility as a Master. Even if his Command Spells were gone and his Servant had vanished, Caules had participated in the Great Holy Grail War by his own will and fought by his own will.

So he would ascertain the outcome right to the very end, as far as he could go. Those were the shackles Caules had placed on himself.

“...Let’s sleep.”

Caules decided to try sleeping even if he had to force himself. Naturally, he had stimulant-type herbs and spells at hand, but those were only for use in emergencies or when his research was making progress. If he managed to fall asleep, then that was fine. Still, he’d had the Magic Crest transplanted into him not long ago. His body was hot and in pain, so he wouldn’t be able to sleep well anyway.

Additionally, there were also spells and herbs for preventing nightmares. *Should I use one?*—Caules wavered over it a little, but decided not to in the end.

He accepted the nightmares about the past and the near future without running away. He knew it was terribly self-righteous of him, but he believed he should face at least this much.

Caules fell asleep, while praying that he and, most of all, his sister would manage to get through tomorrow safely.

—The night wore on.

Unlike her brother, Fiore decided not to sleep. Part of it was that she had trouble falling asleep, but she was also scared of seeing dreams. Her resolve was like soft pudding—it would collapse with the slightest shake.

Unlike usual, Archer was still in materialized form at this hour.

“There’s something I want to think about while maintaining this physical body for a while.”

It wasn’t that large of a burden on her, so Fiore had gladly allowed it. Most likely, he was thinking on a castle lookout not far from here right now.

Fiore thought about Archer. Even though tomorrow would be their final farewell, she felt strangely calm.

Only, she felt an indescribable sense of transience, feeling that something precious was gradually getting further away. Was it because she would give up magecraft after tomorrow, because of her coming parting with Archer, or was it perhaps both? She thought about it absentmindedly.

Before she had transplanted the Magic Crest, she had thought it would be fine this way.

Immediately after the transplant, she felt regret and worry over the fact that she might have done something terrible.

And now, her feelings wavered little by little like a pendulum.

She had thought about discussing it with Archer. About how she might be regretting her choice. But she stopped herself from doing so. This wasn't something she should speak of in this situation. Most of all, her Servant seemed like he would give advice without changing expression at all right now.

—She would do her best on her own.

It was quite disheartening, but also something precious. A person's life was a path chosen even amidst a repetition of regrets. Those regrets would also probably melt away little by little every day.

But even so, she would continuously make new regrets one after another. She would forget them, cover them up, and live while always glossing them over—Ah, how human of her that was.

There were only three things in her life that she had decided to never regret.

The first was how she had loved that dog. Its irritated expression when she washed it in the shower and cleaned off the dirt. Its softened expression when it dried in the hot wind. The way it wagged its tail when she patted its head—its final days were precious memories to her no matter how tragic it was.

The second was her summoning and meeting Chiron as Archer of Black. It was one of the few events she could proudly call a success in all regards in her life.

The third was having learned magecraft... She had enjoyed it. It wasn't depressing or completely pointless. The joy she felt when she successfully used spells burned in her chest even now.

She would be able to live proudly with just the memory of that alone.

Even if she lamented what she lost, she still felt pride over having once had something more precious to her than anything else.

"Ah, but I might die tomorrow."

She murmured that aloud to herself, and then giggled. Naturally, she would feel regret if she died—but she felt like she would be able to take pride in it even if she only managed to make a single step forward.

Without sleeping, Fiore quietly waited for tomorrow.

—The night wore on.

Saber of Red and Shishigou Kairi had left Bucharest and were heading by car to Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Force base, which lay about three hundred kilometers away from the city.

The items Shishigou had requested through the Association of Magi were there. They would no longer return to Bucharest, as their plan was to head to the battlefield next—in other words, to the Hanging Gardens.

The driver Shishigou and Saber of Red in the passenger seat rode the car without exchanging any words. As some melancholy country music flowed out from the car radio, neither of them felt any awkwardness at the silence between them. Saber thought that in itself was strange.

When she'd been alive, she'd never experienced such a silence with anyone else. In most cases, people ran from her, she stood up to take action, or she and the other party hated each other to the point that they were on the verge of killing each other.

There was no one who had let their guard down with her, and there was no one she had let her guard down with. She had thought that was what life, what a knight and what the being known as Mordred was.

"...Hey."

"Hmm, what?"



She didn't even find his curt way of talking all that irritating. There were very few cars on the road right now, and even the few sounds on the road merely emphasized the calm and silence.

"...Hey, I said, what is it?"

Shishigou voice was dubious—speaking of which, she had merely called out to him without any question in mind. Perhaps she had merely thought, *Now then, what should I ask?*

"Ah... I forgot what it was."

After turning silent again for a little while, Shishigou tilted his head in confusion and muttered.

"...That happens a lot to humans, but does the same apply to Servants?"

"It does, doesn't it? After all, we're so real that this is called our second life. Thought we don't need to eat or sleep."

"And yet you eat quite a lot—"

"Shut up. That's not because I'm hungry, but because I'm curious about the taste."

"As expected of someone born on the island known for having the worst cooking."

"Stop it with the insults I can't refute, Master."

She continued talking with him about this worthless topic even while thinking it was worthless. It was fun, so fun that it made her think it would be even more fun if they had alcohol too.

Why hadn't she been able to talk like with anyone during her life—? It was obvious; it was because her father hadn't. As the one who would succeed her father, she couldn't do anything that her father didn't.

But the things that her father hadn't done were so fun.

Did her father never converse with others because it was fun? Or because her father didn't find it fun? Or did her father merely think it was unnecessary?

It might be all of those reasons. Her father always looked too far ahead. Her father had freely devoted all efforts to build a peaceful country.

Naturally, her father's knights had always devoted their efforts to that cause. But they were too short-sighted. Though it was necessary to first make a foundation in order to build a castle, they didn't understand that and merely asked for the castle.

Or perhaps it was the opposite. They were unable to understand what their efforts in the present would bring in the future.

To dry up a village within their territory was a callous and cruel act... They didn't move a single step from that viewpoint. They didn't see the victory that lay beyond it. That was only natural; the possibility that they would lose if they didn't dry up their own territory was merely a hypothetical future.

Naturally, the king had explained to them. They had heard the king's words that the village was being sacrificed for the sake of victory. But—

—Maybe, maybe they could have won even without drying up their villages?

When they thought like that, distrust towards the king always took root in them... After all, it had been none other than the Knight of Rebellion herself who had said that to instigate them.

The king was isolated, the king was alone—that was a natural, unmistakable fact.

But... maybe it would have been better to talk to each other.

If they had been frank with each other and deepened their mutual understanding, maybe a different path would have appeared—

“What's with you, suddenly turning silent?”

“Shut up. A future king like me has a lot of worries that ordinary people can't understand.”

“Yeah, yeah, the imperial court magus will be quiet now.”

When Shishigou said that, Saber of Red suddenly imagined it—Shishigou wearing a robe that just emphasized his suspicious appearance and bending his back like an old man.

She couldn't help bursting out with laughter.

"It doesn't suit you at all! It's no good, Master! You should start by rectifying that fact of yours first."

"Hey, don't say things about other people's faces. Despite how it seems, I'm sensitive about this frightening appearance of mine!"

Saber of Red was a little surprised by those words—and then she realized again. It was a trivial detail, but she had once again learned something new about the person known as Shishigou Kairi.

Just by spending a few days together, she had learned a ton of facts about someone else. How much would she have learned about others if she talked with them during her life?

If she had talked with the king—would she have been able to understand the king?

Even though it was already in the far past, she couldn't help but regretfully think that way.

"...Are we there yet?"

"Just a little longer. I know you're bored, but—"

"No, I'm not bored. More importantly, talk to me more, Master. Talk about something trivial and worthless."

Shishigou smiled bitterly at her pestering tone.

In truth, they still had a long way to go. He was worried that she would be bored, but if she was satisfied just by talking, then that was perfect.

"Can't be helped. Then let me tell you the story of a man I met on a certain battlefield—"

The Master Shishigou spoke of a trivial tale, and the Servant Saber laughed as she listened to that trivial tale, and then recounted her own few absurd stories from when she was a knight.

This might be the last time I laugh, Saber thought.

She wasn't scared of dying, and she would feel no despair even if her wish wasn't granted. She would merely say "That's how it is" with a light sigh and shrug.

Even if the two of them were blessed with luck in every aspect, made a perfect battle strategy, thoroughly displayed their abilities and got the Holy Grail, their parting would still eventually come.

"...Hey, Master. Is parting sad?"

As a slight urge of weakness sprouted in her, she involuntarily asked that question. She already expected his answer. 'Parting isn't sad. If people have memories, they can live on.'

Shishigou, of course, betrayed her expectations when he replied.

"Of course it's sad. All the more so if it's an eternal separation. Listen, Saber. To part with someone means you can't talk with them. Being unable to talk with them means you'll eternally lose the chance to understand each another. No matter how strongly you're connected to them—as they fade away into the flow of time, the things you remember about them will also disappear."

"Then meeting other is pointless?"

"Completely pointless. If we were perfect beings, we wouldn't need to meet anyone else in the first place. The reason we meet and talk with others is in order to try and fill something we lack within ourselves. But sadly, we're far from perfect. That's why we have to fill up our feelings of loneliness by encountering others. In other words—encountering others is a luxury. If you think of it that way, you can endure meeting even the most unpleasant of people."

"...What contrary logic."

Saber's amazed voice made Shishigou heartily laugh. Indeed, what he said wasn't mistaken. It was a trivial conversation without any potential for anymore more, an act that wasted time in a completely pointless manner.

It was such a luxury, such precious time spent—

All the more so for a Servant. Normally, a Servant would only fight, fight and fight until everything was over, after all.

“So well, let’s enjoy this luxury while we have the chance. Now then, back to my story—”

Shishigou continued talking—and she listened to that trivial story while closing her eyes.

—The night wore on.

Like Rider of Black and Caster of Red, Archer of Red didn’t like going into spiritual form very much. She preferred perceiving the feel and smell of the earth.

There was practically none of the smell of iron which she hated in the Hanging Gardens, but she couldn’t sniff the smell of trees or earth either. And most of all, she couldn’t hear the laughter of children here.

Since the dawn of history, the ones who were most exploited in this world were children. Many children simply cried and died without ever being able to smile and laugh.

Each time she thought that, Archer was struck by despair strong enough to tear out her heart. The world should have been simple. A world where all children laughed only required adults to give a little concern and help.

And yet they trampled over, abused and never gave love to the young ones born into this world, who they should have been considered half of themselves.

Having once been one of those children, Archer could understand quite well. How cruel and painful it was. And also—how joyous it felt to have her pleading hand grasped by someone else.

“—That’s right. That’s why I won’t deny you all. I’ll accept you. I’ll love you. I’ll truly love you all.”

Looking at her discolored right arm, Archer smiled. The vengeful spirits continued to whisper.

Kill, kill, kill, kill everyone, kill every last one of them.

...It was abnormal. Low-class vengeful spirits could only repeat the desires from when they were alive. If they wanted to 'return', they would continue to earnestly seek to return. Even if a hundred or a thousand years passed, as long as they existed as spirits, that wouldn't change.

But the vengeful spirits possessing Archer's right arm had changed their wish. Was it born from Archer or Red's own desire, or was it because the vengeful spirits actually understood Archer's love and hatred? Even Archer herself didn't know.

She was certain of only one thing.

Her wish was absolutely correct, and the fates of the children in the world hanged in the balance. She couldn't afford to lose. Even if—she became a *beast* that froze the hearts of those who saw her.

That's right, she had that power. Not her power as a hero, but the power of a Monstrous Beast of punishment sent by the gods—but if it was for the sake of these children, she would happily become a beast.

So just wait a little longer. It's all right, I'll gladly become the cornerstone for you all.

She whispered while holding her right arm closely.

Her right arm replied to Archer's words with a faint "Thank you". At the very least, she [heard] it.

As long as she had this voice, she could fight. She could kill. She could trample over all obstacles and destroy all evil.

Even if she was exterminated as a monster, she would let herself fall into destruction while smiling—

—The night wore on.

Rider of Red took the 'poisonous serpent' stance with his spear. It was an effective style where he held the middle part of the handle and could use quick thrusts while warding off the enemies attacks. He aimed at the stomach of his enemy, Chiron, with that stance.

However, the attack was avoided quite naturally by the enemy screwing his body with a side step.

The enemy saw through Rider's movements. The moment he took this stance, the enemy understood where he would aim.

—How should he respond as he pitched forward in readiness? After remaining vigilant for a counter and dodging to the left or right, the enemy used a punch or kick. There was an 80% chance the enemy would do a roundhouse kick and attack at the same time as he twisted his torso; that was the most logical course of action. That's why, now that he was pitching forward, the enemy would be forced to aim at his head. How should he defend himself? He could draw back his spear and thrust it again... but it wouldn't make it in time. He could lower his head and dodge... but that would cause his stance to collapse even further.

Cut and retry.

He resolutely set up his first move by jumping and then thrusting—Retry.

He tried to thrust after tripping his enemy up—Retry.

He swiped his spear horizontally, turned around as the attack was blocked and swiped his spear again. He aimed at the knees and thrusted downwards—No good. Retry.

"Damn it, nothing works."

Rider of Red closed his eyes with a sigh. His palms were soaked with sweat. The back of his neck was cold, and his entire body hurt as if he'd actually been punched and kicked everywhere.

Rider was imagining a hypothetical one-on-one battle against Archer of Black in a situation where they were on a flat field without any obstacles.

In the end... he had gone over five battles, and made mistakes and lost each time. As long as he fought with the spear that Archer had taught him how to use, all his combos were seen through. Additionally, Archer's power of observation was practically on the level of future sight. If Rider tried to use a surprise attack, Archer would read it and deal him a counterattack.

Naturally, the situation wasn't as bad as it seemed. The way Rider lunged with his spear was truly divine speed incarnate. Even if his attacks were seen through, they couldn't all be avoided. In the hypothetical battle just now, he had fought in a situation where his speed was not taken into account.

But he couldn't say for sure that it wouldn't actually go that way. Archer of Black's skills knew no depth. He was perfectly balanced in all aspects; that was precisely why all heroes sought to be trained by him. Moreover, Servants were summoned in the form of their prime. Though his appearance was human, his stats were of that when the being known as Chiron was at his most perfect.

If he ignored all their feelings and bonds in the coming battle and simply considered and compared their respective power, Archer of Black was the enemy wanted to fight the least. Therefore, Rider always imagined the worst situation as he fought—and continued to lose each time.

“...I feel like I keep making a mistake right from the first move.”

Since his opponent had greater battle power than him, making a mistake right from the start was fatal. Since they both knew almost all of each other's moves, he could tell the fight would end in this manner by logically thinking it through.

Since both of them moved completely logically, the first one to make a mistake would lose.

However, there was a strong possibility that such a situation wouldn't occur. The only thing that the Black camp had which could deal with his chariot was the other Rider's Hippogriff. His opponent couldn't fly no matter how he struggled.

These conditions wouldn't be overturned unless something significant was done.

But on the other hand, the enemy should also be desperate to overturn this situation. The Black camp might use a plan that he himself couldn't think of.

In that case, his opponent would definitely aim for him. He knew that since he would definitely do the same if he were in the same position.

That was because he possessed a body that couldn't be harmed except by those with divine blood—and "he" was the only Servant on the other side who had divine blood.

...No, such reasons didn't matter.

Rider knew. His quivering muscles, creaking bones and boiling cells whispered to him.

—The one to fight that man will be you.

—You are the only one who has the right to fight him.

It wasn't that he wanted to kill his opponent. He didn't hate him either. This was a pure contest of strength; he wouldn't hate his opponent even if he lost, and he wouldn't bear a grudge even if he was killed.

He just wanted to fight him, to swing his clenched fists, to kick and to pierce him with his spear.

How strong was he compared to the teacher he had once loved and respected? He wanted to show him. In life, he had been extolled as a hero by everyone. But his teacher had never seen his exploits after their final parting.

He was proud.

Just like other heroes such as Heracles and Jason, he was incredibly proud of having been taught by Chiron. And yet, his teacher had always merely smiled calmly. He felt no pride in granting wisdom and strength to young heroes like Achilles. Neither did he feel jealous of them for being praised as heroes.

"Of course. Even without me, they would have naturally become heroes on their own eventually. I merely gave them a little push from behind. But you know, Achilles. That act... that act of giving them a little push is something I take great pride in—"

Chiron had once said that to Achilles when he was young. This might be a thought that suddenly came to Achilles at that time. Or perhaps it was something he always thought about while he was being taught—

Achilles thought to himself that Chiron, who continued to teach and guide others, had never once fought seriously.

And at the same time, he also thought that he wanted to drag out his great teacher's—full power.

The Great Holy Grail War truly was a miracle unto itself.

Depending on the situation, they both might not be able to display their power to perfection.

But that moment would come. *It would definitely come.* Rider intended to devote this final remaining day to training.

The night wore on, and the sun would soon rise again. But Rider continued to glare through the darkness without closing his eyes.

Error, retry, miss, retry.

Rider of Red continued to repeat hundreds of battles in order to take down Archer of Black—

—The night wore on.

In a small spring within the confines of the Hanging Gardens which ruled the sky, Lancer of Red bathed himself out of habit. Naturally, Servants had no need to clean themselves, but his habits from when he was alive wouldn't go away.

Karna silently washed his body while gazing at the mysterious phenomenon of the water flowing upstream.

In contrast to his magnificent armor and dazzling spear, Karna preferred the simple life.

In the first place, he himself had never wished for his armor or spear. His armor was given to him due to his mother's supplication to the gods, and he received his spear in exchange for giving up his armor.

The reason he had lived after being abandoned by his mother was due

to the power humbly bestowed upon him by his father and the armor he had received thanks to his mother.

He always lived without ever sullyng his father's name.

That guiding principle of his hadn't changed even now in his second life. So naturally, he had to obey his Master as a Servant. Lancer of Red refused to commit any act that would sully his father's name.

However, his Master had already been restrained even before Lancer had been summoned, a problem that went beyond merely the matter of how he acted.

His Master continued to view a dream with empty eyes. He couldn't communicate with him, and there was no chance of mutual understanding. The only thing Lancer understood from his ramblings was that his Master mistakenly thought that he had obtained the Holy Grail.

Knowing that was enough for Lancer. He would obtain the Holy Grail and grant his Master's wish... Of course, he knew full well how difficult that would be to accomplish.

He probably wouldn't manage to get it. The Holy Grail was right before his eyes, but this wasn't a situation where he would take it away that easily, and most of all—Lancer of Red's Master had been changed to Amakusa Shirou Tokisada, the one who currently possessed the Grail.

He had no intention of betraying his former Master, but he couldn't go against Shirou. He was completely cornered in every direction.

However, such a situation was par for the course for Karna, the Hero of Charity. He held no grudge against his former Master or his current Master Shirou.

He merely did what he could within the range of actions that were available to him.

He merely give the things that were asked from him as long as it was possible.

And he always accepted everything solemnly no matter the result.

—No, perhaps not quite everything.

Lancer of Red recalled the one thing he had continued to obsess over.

There was person, one hero in this world that had continued to stir up Karna's heart.

His name was Arjuna. 'Kiritin: The Shining Diadem', 'Vijaya: The Victor', 'Dhananjaya: The Prosperous One'—he was a man who had various names and was loved by all.

If Karna was a man who had everything taken from him in exchange for his spear and armor, Arjuna was a man who had received everything with no compensation in return.

Was the emotion Karna held within him envy? Or was it something else entirely?

Karna had never known the answer to that right until the very end. After all, as someone who had never envied anything or anyone, he had been unable to concretely put a name to the feelings that stirred his heart.

...Soon after this Great Holy Grail War began, he had received another chance to find out.

Saber of Black—Lancer could tell that that man held traces of Arjuna somewhere in him. When he heard of his true name from Shirou Kotomine afterwards, Lancer had understood the reason for that.

The tragic hero from a royal bloodline who had obtained wealth, prestige and everything else—Siegfried.

But unlike Arjuna, his end was terribly tragic.

An untimely death due to a sneak attack. Without even the time to swing his dragon-slaying sword, the invincible Siegfried had his only weak point attacked and lost his life.

Karna thought of all the various Heroic Spirits participating in the Great Holy Grail War as unique and rare beings.

He thought of his allies as comrades to work with and his enemies as rare warriors of valor. In that sense, Karna 'comprehended' the other Heroic Spirits more deeply than anyone else.

But the only one he held a personal interest in was Saber of Black. Though they had exchanged few words, Lancer had glimpsed into the man after exchanging hundreds and thousands of blows with their respective weapons.

A man who was very similar to Arjuna, but at the same time hungered for something.

A man who held no regrets over his untimely end, but instead sought something new.

And—a just hero, so evident that anyone could tell. He had wished to fight Lancer of Red once more and saw him as an enemy that must be defeated. That was the greatest honor and joy for a warrior like Lancer.

That battle, and that promise. Had there ever been anything else that made him boil so much with excitement before? He felt gratitude for the actions and warm conversations of humans. But that was far removed from ‘selfishness’. He had never possessed a desire and joy that made him seethe.

But he found it on the battlefield. Now that he thought back, Karna had only encountered joy on the battlefield. His entire existence was focused on the tip of his spear. It was the only instant where he was released from the thoughts of the people he allied with and could freely run forth as his ‘bared self’.

The sparks of clashing weapons were twinkling stars to Karna. A worthy enemy who could easily push back his bared self and told him to give it his all. Thought it was arrogant of him, it was enough to make him think that his entire life had been for the sake of tasting the joy of that moment. That’s why, when Saber of Black disappeared, when the prospects of another fight vanished in the empty sky, Lancer had felt unspeakable regret.

Saber of Black had disappeared.

But—*he still hadn’t died*. Lancer didn’t know the reason behind it, but Saber was still in this world even now.

In that case... their promise was also still valid.

Naturally, Lancer understood that ‘he’ was a being far removed from Saber of Black. Lancer understood that ‘he’ was a being who had been born with everything taken away from him, even more so than Lancer, and yet still struggled to live.

But a promise was a promise. It couldn't be changed. Back then, Karna and Siegfried had wagered each other's lives, battled with deadly technique and put off the conclusion for later.

—They had sworn on their names to definitely fight and unleash their utmost power against each other. It was a trust founded on their very lives. To break it would be equal to insulting that man's life.

He had surely entrusted something to the one who had now become Saber of Black. Lancer believed that ascertaining that was would tie to the promise they'd made.

Thus, Lancer of Red lived, in order to protect his Master to the end of the war and fulfill his promise with Saber of Black.

—It didn't feel like nighttime at all to me.

The calm air became filled with a heavy heat, burning my skin.

—*Here again?*

I touched the coarse rock surface with my hand. Just how many times had I encountered the evil dragon Fafnir already? No matter how many times I swung my sword, my blade never pierced its skin. I had to constantly avoid its attacks by a hair-breadth; failing even once would mean instant death.

There was no showy heroic tale in that battle.

It was a hellish comedy where I had to swing my sword just in order to survive, no matter how unsightly and ridiculous it looked.

I know that I can't beat it. I had no experience or spark in me; inside, I was merely a soft homunculus who had taken on the outer shell of a hero.

But right now, I was the dragon-slayer Siegfried. I had to challenge this despairing battle once again.

The dragon opened its jaws and released a bluish-white light.

Flames burst out. I determined that it was impossible to dodge. I

released the power of **Balmung** and blocked the attack by pushing forward—!

The dragon's breath was a surging blast of extreme heat, extreme impact and extreme pressure. A normal human would die in an instant from either being burnt to ash or having their lungs torn out of their very mouths from the wind pressure.

...Even so, I managed to survive it.

I tried to suck in a breath and ended up coughing violently.

I seemed to have survived thanks to the sturdiness of my shell and the sword blast from **Balmung**. The great pain and suffocation I felt could be endured as long as I had this shell.

But—

My arms couldn't move. Even though my entire body was as hot as if I had been bathed in boiling oil, the heat of my body was frozen in fear. I couldn't win; even with a hero's body, it was impossible for 'Sieg' to beat it.

What should I do?

There's no way I could know. Fighting, escaping and negotiating were all impossible against this enemy. I had no option besides giving up.

—As if I could give up.

Even after scolding myself like that, I couldn't think of anything. Perhaps sensing that, the dragon sidled forward as if to bestow fear onto me.

And then, it suddenly opened its jaws and attacked. I reflexively counterattacked with my sword.

Perhaps the inside of its mouth would be softer than its skin...

That faint hope was easily smashed.

"Wh... at...?"

If my hopes had merely been smashed, then I still could have dealt with it. But what the dragon aimed for wasn't myself, but the great sword which had blocked its breath earlier—**Balmung**.

The dragon's teeth, whose hardness far surpassed any steel, clamped down on the sword and bite off the blade.

The legendary sword which had been bestowed to Siegfried by the Nibelung. The dual holy and cursed sword which released a blast of twilight—

If it was held not by a hero, but by a homunculus... then it could also break easily like this.

I... really wasn't Siegfried after all. That hero had managed to come out with a plan to break through even a situation like this.

And yet, the only thing I could do was resolve myself worthlessly. I was going to die. I don't know what will happen in reality, but the me here would be torn about by the dragon's teeth.

Losing this battle is inevitable; I was merely unlucky.

I wanted to explain it away with such swords. I was merely unlucky—for being here, in this situation and at this moment.

That's only natural. Just what do you think you are?

A homunculus, an artificial lifeform created through magecraft, and a mass-produced one at that. I merely survived by relying on fortunate chance and clinging to the kindness of others.

—My soul is pure and untouched, and therefore I can *become anything*.

My self-torturing thoughts halted at that sudden revelation. But, before I could understand what exactly it was, the dragon clamped down on me with its mouth.

Its fangs bite into me. I writhed in pain so great I couldn't even scream. I let go of the handle of my sword and feebly hit the dragon with both hands.

I was being devoured while alive. The experience was more painful and terrifying than I had ever imagined. As I struggled, my gaze happened to meet the eyes of the dragon—and it seemed to be laughing smugly at me.

Ah, this dragon has surely devoured thousands of humans. It had probably tasted their fear and despair.

Even though it was of the dragon race, the very top of the Phantasmal Species, it was unbelievably avaricious. It continued to gather up possessions and devour humans who presented themselves as sacrifices.

No matter how many times it was hit, the hands of humans couldn't even be felt by it, let alone hurt it.

Its fangs crushed and pierced my armor and body. This armor's hardness wasn't ordinary, but it was like paper before the fangs of a dragon.

I want fangs, I thought.

I want fangs to fight. I want fangs to win. I want fangs so as not to lose.

I want this dragon's fangs.

Before me was the dragon's upper jaw. I opened my mouth and bite into it like a starved wolf.

A howl rang out—the dragon was shocked, unable to believe it.

I couldn't believe it either.

I realized.

And then I laughed.

Thus, my path was settled.

I threw away all other options, not knowing if I'd ever had them in the first place, and cut open a path.

The [Dead Count Shapeshifter: Dragon Revelation Command Spells] on my left arm, which governed destruction. There was no longer any need to count down to my death. The result would be the same no matter how many Command Spells I use. Since I decided to participate in this war, *the countdown would definitely reach zero.*

But I was already resolved to everything.

I bit into the upper jaw and bared my fangs at the dragon.

— — And then, Sieg opened his eyes. His consciousness was clear and free of pain.

He looked out the window from his bed. It was still dark outside, but the sky was becoming slightly bluish.

Dawn wasn't far away. Determining he couldn't sleep any further, Sieg decided to get up.

— The night came to an end as dawn broke.

Ruler gazed at the gradually changing sky through the window without getting tired of it. She had already finished her morning prayer. If she were to consider Laetitia's physical health, it might be better to go back to sleep—but even so, she didn't feel like sleeping at all.

Her heart felt uneasy for two reasons. The first reason had to do with Amakusa Shirou Tokisada... and his plan to save humanity.

Certainly, at a glance, it looked as if she had been summoned as Ruler in order to prevent his plan. But currently the Greater Grail was in the possession of the enemy, and at this rate she wouldn't be able to prevent his plan.

At this point, wasn't it as if she had unconsciously acted to the benefit of her enemy?

...No good, she was starting to think about the threads of destiny. The threads of destiny were complex, twisted and intertwined all over the place. Thinking about it would only lead to doubt and uncertainty.

The plan to save humanity that Amakusa Shirou had declared he would accomplish was merely the mutterings of a madman. His plan would definitely bring about destruction—that was why she had been summoned. It was precisely because she thought that way that she clearly opposed him, and averted her eyes from the countless doubts that ran through her mind.

What if his wish truly is correct?

Could she really say that the answer that a hero like him had reached over the course of sixty years was truly mistaken?

A way to save humanity without hurting anyone and without spilling a drop of blood certainly does not exist—Did she really think that?

All humans should have dreamt of achieving it at some point during their lives.

Why did she say that Amakusa Shirou Tokisada couldn't do it?

If his wish was correct.

If his words were true.

What should Jeanne d'Arc choose?

And there was also the other reason for her worries. In a sense, it might be the more serious problem.

She had always continued to think about it, the role 'he' was meant to fulfill in this Great Holy Grail War—

"Can't sleep?"

The moment she heard those words, Ruler stifled the unease in her heart and turned around. Sieg stood there wearing plain pajamas.

"Yeah. The night is almost over. Most likely, today will be the last. We will head towards the Hanging Gardens and fight. In order to stop Amakusa Shirou Tokisada."

"Yeah, we have to stop him."

"...Is it okay if I ask you one last thing?"

Ruler spoke in a somewhat stiff voice. When Sieg nodded, she asked hesitatingly.

"Sieg-kun, are you really sure you should be *on this side*?"

It was a question she had asked him several times before. Being on this side, being part of this war, participating in a battle of kill or be killed — *How conscientious of her*, thought Sieg as he replied in the affirmative.

“Yes, of course.”

There was no hesitation in his voice. But Ruler continued questioning him.

“...Rider once told you that ‘You can do anything now’, right? That’s exactly right. Your current self can go anywhere and do anything. Your greatest worry, your fellow homunculi are embarking on a new life. Yet why must you still fight? You don’t have to fight; it’s *fine if you don’t fight*, Sieg-kun.”

Sieg felt a strong pressure as if his heart were being gripped.

You don’t have to fight, there’s no need —

Those soft words and kind voice were things he had wished for somewhere in his heart. But he shook his head as if to shake off the warm temptation.

“I... have a duty as both a Master and a Servant.”

He had become a Master and could even become a Servant. There was surely meaning in that —

“Sieg-kun, merely acting according to a higher purpose isn’t everything there is to life.”

Ruler said that in a somewhat self-punitive tone. Sieg felt like those words were extremely heavy and important.

“Ruler...”

“It’s true that you obtained power. That power is necessary, and that might be precisely why you’re here. But even if you’re here by your own will, it isn’t your fate to be here. That’s why — that’s why it’s fine for you to run away, Sieg-kun.”

Ruler trembled, as if enduring some violent emotion.

Being guided here by destiny, being here because it was necessary — there was something wrong about that way of thinking.

When Sieg started to ponder on it, Ruler placed a hand on his cheek. She looked at him with a sad smile.

“...Sorry. I seem to have confused you. Please be at ease. You’ll surely be fine, Sieg-kun.”

You’ll be fine—Ruler whispered that and looked out the window once more. Faint light was starting to pour it through the window.

The dawn of the end had finally arrived.

The night ended for everyone, and the sky gradually became tinged with the light of dawn.

The result of the war over the Holy Grail wouldn’t determine whether or not the world was destroyed.

But the world would be pressed to choose between undergoing a transformation or not.

Amakusa Shirou Tokisada would save humanity ‘righteously’.

Jeanne d’Arc would deny that ‘righteously’.

They each had their own justice and things they wouldn’t turn over. There was no evil in this battle; there was only justice and faith.

However, most wars might be like that. Every human who has a great cause to fight for and dreams of a world that blesses them and their comrades with happiness chooses to fight.

In the end, this Great Holy Grail War was the same.

You didn’t win because you were just and correct. *The victors were just and correct because they won.*

Both Rulers understood that. Therefore they wouldn’t censure each other, but merely fight to kill one another.

If there was a way for this war to end without any further blood being spilled, it would only be by one side understanding and accepting that the stance of the other side was *correct*.

And that situation was impossible nine times out of ten. Too much blood had been spilled for either side to understand each other.

Even so, one camp held a naïve hope. That perhaps they could understand each other by talking—

CHAPTER 3 END

Chapter 4

—Thus, the day of the final battle arrived with gentle rays of sunlight.

Right after dawn, Fiore, Caules and Archer of Black boarded a limousine along with a homunculus driver.

“Then, Gordes-oji-sama, please take care of things here while we’re gone.”

The one to see them off was the only remaining magus at the Fortress of Millennia, Gordes Musik Yggdmillennia. He was in charge of looking after the castle in their absence and conducting negotiations with various organizations in order to find a way for Yggdmillennia to survive after this war. It could only be described as the miserable job of dealing with the aftermath of defeat, but oddly enough, Gordes was most skilled in those kinds of negotiations.

“Yeah... Well, err, you know. Come back alive, all right?”

Gordes’ farewell was quite half-baked. The impression that stood out the most about him was the fact that his stubble and loosely hanging bangs had become frayed and messy in the last few days. However, for some reason, Caules actually felt that that Gordes was more likable like this.

“Yes, returning alive is the major premise of this mission. Please take care of the homunculi here as well.”

“Don’t dump these guys on my lap. They’re already living quite fine on their own as they please.”

“—Fiore-sama, don’t worry. No matter what he may say, Gordes-sama is a man with a generous and kind heart who saved us all.”

Next to Gordes, Tool spoke while emphasizing the “sama”. Gordes turned and glared at Tool bitterly, but she feigned innocence.

“Ufufu. In that case, we’ll be off.”

“See ya, Gordes-ossan. Try not to argue with the homunculi too much.”

“Fool, who would start an argument they’re clearly going to lose? Just go already!”

Lastly, Archer of Black bowed his head courteously, and then the limousine departed. As Gordes watched it leave, he had a sudden thought.

—*The Holy Grail War is beyond the means of us magi.*

An omnipotent wish-granting device... A parasitic magical tool that connects to the leylines and continuously absorbs vast amounts of mana. However, to put it another way, it was the same as the nuclear weapons made by those who’d been drunk on science. Moreover, it was uncertain whether it could even be properly controlled. It couldn’t even be activated without conducting the ritual of the Holy Grail War. And to finish the ritual, you had to take down six pairs of incredibly strong Masters and Servants—

The whole setup had too many holes to count. Yet even as he thought that, Gordes was self-aware enough to acknowledge that he lacked talent. Not talent as a magus—perhaps it would be better to say he lacked the resourcefulness to fight and win.

He didn’t think that he lacked skill as a magus. But he hadn’t sincerely tried to deal with things like strategy and tactics.

It was too late for him to regret it now. He knew that. He knew that, but—

“Hey, what are you moping over? We don’t have the time to slack off here, remember?”

“I know, damn it. I know already.”

Gordes drowned out those pointless thoughts. That’s right, it was already too late. No matter who won or lost next, and regardless of whether or not humanity was saved, none of it had anything to do with Gordes.

Those were things for saints and heroes to think about. Right now, Gordes had several problems that he had to deal with as soon as possible.

The first thing he had to do—was notify the entire clan that they had effectively lost in the Great Holy Grail War and then send a message of surrender to the Association in order to try and bring an end to the conflict with minimal sacrifices.

The whole prospect of it was depressing, but he convinced himself by saying it was better than dying. Gordes was used to receiving insults, ridicule and scorn, and he had tasted humiliation several times in just the past few days.

Bowing his head in shame and apologizing to their sworn enemy the Association was practically nothing for him at this point. However, he had far too few advantageous cards to bring to the negotiation table.

This negotiation might drag on for a long while—

“Hey, what are you daydreaming around for? Hurry up, we’re starting the castle repairs today.”

Recalling that particular matter thanks to Tool’s words, Gordes changed his plans. First, he would start with the work that was right in front of him... It wasn’t like he wanted to push off the unpleasant work for later. Not at all.

It was already past evening by the time Fiore arrived at the safe house Sieg and the others were staying at. After she knocked, Rider swiftly opened the door with Sieg and Ruler in tow.

Fiore sat in her wheelchair before the door with Archer of Black behind her.

"Ah, it's that time already?"

"Sorry for making you wait. Then, shall we get going?"

Rider of Black tilted his head in puzzlement.

"Get going where?"

"Ah, I still haven't informed you all. We're going to the Henry Coanda International Airport. There, we'll board airplanes and head to the Hanging Gardens. Please come board the car, everyone. I don't mind if you change into your armor now."

Fiore guided the three of them to the limousine. Ruler and Rider followed her suggestion and changed into their armor.

"All right... Are you sure you haven't forgotten anything, Sieg-kun?"

"Of course not. This is the only equipment I have, anyway."

Sieg patted the sword hanging from his waist. It was the sword that Rider of Black had lent him. He probably wouldn't even have a chance to use it in the final battle. By the time he resorted to using this, the situation would likely be hopelessly bleak.

Even so, Sieg felt reassured when he carried this, like an iron rod supporting his back. Not because having a sword was reassuring, but because it made him remember the warmth of the person who had given it to him.

"I plan to keep it with me, but is that all right with you, Rider?"

Rider readily agreed as if it were only natural.

"Of course. I gave it to you, after all."

While feeling slightly reluctant to part with the safe house they had stayed at for a short while, the three of them joined Fiore in the limousine.

"Wow, it's so spacious inside!"

"Umm, is it really okay to wear my armor in here? It's hard to sit here without damaging the seats—"

"I don't mind. This car and everything in it are merely appropriated goods," Fiore smoothly replied, as she skillfully sat herself down on the rear seat with her already activated Bronze-Link Manipulators.

“Now, let’s be off! We should arrive..... in about five minutes.”

It was so close that they wouldn’t even have the time to properly enjoy the limousine.

“...Couldn’t we just walk?”

Fiore firmly denied Ruler’s suggestion.

“We rarely get the chance to use this limousine. This might be the last time we get to ride it.”

And with that, they arrived at the airport in the blink of an eye.

Unlike Sieg, who was a homunculus born in the Yggdmillennia castle, and Rider, who was a Servant summoned in the castle, Ruler had arrived in this country from France through this airport, and thus she recognized just how abnormal the current situation was.

It wasn’t that anything had changed here. There was merely *no one else around*. The taxis in front of the airport, the customers, even the security guards... They were all gone.

“Ah, yes. It’d be a problem if we were seen by anyone, so naturally, I reserved the whole place. From the next twelve hours, we’ll be the only ones using this airport.”

“Reserved, you say...?”

Ruler was left completely speechless in the face of Fiore’s casual words. Sieg and Rider seemed to be thinking ‘We can’t afford to involve any outsiders, so that’s a wise decision’ and thought no more of it. In Ruler’s eyes, though, reserving an entire international airport went beyond the realm of the ridiculous.

In front of the airport entrance doors, men in suits stood imposingly as watchman in place of the airport’s security guards.

When Fiore approached them and swiftly said what seemed to be a password, the men nodded and opened the doors.

“I’ve set up a Boundary Field to keep people away around the airport. No one will be able to approach within a several kilometer radius around this area.

"Wow, it really is completely deserted," murmured Rider of Black in amazement.

Just as Rider had said, there was no one besides themselves in this vast airport. There were no receptionists at the counter, the always-running baggage claim conveyor belt was halted, and even the electronic display boards were off.

"Even I can't help but be amazed by my own sister..." Caules murmured in astonishment, as someone who had the common sense of an ordinary person. "Just how much money did you spend on all this?"

"It wasn't that much. The price of arranging this was only five times the cost of the Mystic Code I designed. The bigger problem was the money to purchase the airplanes. Really now, I asked for old second-hand planes since *they're going to be scrapped anyway*, yet why did they cost so much? We truly are lucky to have the fortune that Grandfather Darnic left behind."

"Well, that's... because they're jumbo jets."

Sieg looked down at the visible airfield through the window in amazement. There were a total of ten old jumbo jets which Fiore had bought.

Fiore said that they were going to use all of these with their destruction in mind from the start. True, it was a valid decision, since a single plane would be completely annihilated by concentrated attacks. So instead, they would send out several decoy plans to increase their chances of survival... It was quite reasonable, if you didn't take the accompanying cost into account.

"Then, we'll deploy in the formation I explained in the car... Rider."

"Yes, yes?"

"Your tome is our final hope. Have you remembered its true name?"

"Err..."

Rider awkwardly averted his eyes—the faces of everyone else present turned pale.

"Hey, don't tell me you still don't remember!? After coming all this way, that's—"

Fiore drew close and pressed Rider, who waved his hands frantically.

“It’ll be fine, it’ll fine! Once it’s night, I’ll remember it! But look, it’s still evening right now. Just give me a little more time, okay?”

“We can trust you, right?”

“Leave it to me!”

Rider confidently placed his hand over his chest—however, dubious stares remained fixed on him.

“Aha,ahaha... Master, help!”

Rider ran behind Sieg’s back to protect himself from the stares.

“Rider... I’d like to talk with you about something with just the two of us, is that all right?”

“Eh? No, umm—”

Rider tried to say “Wait a minute”, but Sieg grabbed his arm without bothering to ask for any further permission and moved them both away from everyone else.

“...What is it?”

“A love confession, perhaps?”

The two siblings present both tilted their head curiously and conversed without any sense of tension.

“Maybe if it was Rider, but there’s no way Sieg would do that.”

Archer of Black joined their conversation as well, equally unconcerned. Meanwhile, for some reason, Ruler had gone off to follow Sieg and Rider.

“W-What, what, what?”

Sieg pushed Rider against the wall next to a paper cup coffee vending machine as if to hide him in its shadow—upon which Rider stared at Sieg with open confusion. *That’s a rare expression for Rider*, thought Sieg.

“Rider. I’m asking this to make sure.”

“Y-Yeah?”

“—Are you scared?”

The question was blunt and sudden, and that's precisely why it caught Rider off guard. Rider stared at Sieg dumfounded for a short while, but then his shoulders discouragingly drooped.

"...Yeah. But how did you know?"

"You told me before, remember? That you *became scared the instant you regained your senses*. The brighter and fuller the moon is, the more your sense of reason vanishes. But to put it another way, you regain your reason on dark nights when the moon isn't out, enough that you can remember your tome's true name."

"Despite the situation, I'm still happy that you remembered those casual words of mine... Yeah, it's exactly as you guessed. Master, I'm... scared. I know you're probably disappointed at hearing words completely unsuitable for a Servant, but I'm scared," murmured Rider with a gloomy expression.

"Do you mean... you're scared of dying?"

"Hmm? No, not that. I'm not scared of dying. This much is true. I really don't like pain and dying, but it's not scary."

"Then what are you—?"

Rider sighed in lamentation.

"Obviously, I'm scared of *you* dying. Seeing someone you care about die and understanding that they're dead really takes its toll. When my sanity evaporates, I can forget about it for a while. It's precisely because I forget about it that I can take absurd risks. But when my thoughts become clear like they are now, I keep imagining terrifying outcomes."

Even if he released the book's true name, what if the enemy had some means to counteract it?

The only thing the tome could block was magecraft. It couldn't block the physical attacks of Rider and Archer of Red. If one of them managed to land a hit on Rider of Black—it would be a fatal blow.

He'd die. And everyone else would too. All because he was weak.

"I wish I were stronger. I wish I could stay a fool who even forgets the fact that he's weak. But on nights of the new moon, it's no good. When my reason returns, I'm—"

Sieg grasped Rider of Black's hand. He spoke while looking at Rider right in the eye with the same perfectly transparent gaze he'd had when they'd first met.

"It doesn't matter whether you're strong or weak. I think and believe that you're an amazing person, Rider. After all, you saved me. You would have done the same thing regardless of whether or not you had your sense of reason, right?"

Though surprised at having his hand held, Rider managed to vaguely nod.

Yes. That's why you're fine the way you are, thought Sieg.

"Whether we fail and die or succeed and live, nothing would have begun for me in the first place if you hadn't saved me back then. I wouldn't have met Ruler either. The very fact that I'm standing here right now is already miraculous. That's why you're fine the way you are. Just do as you please like always."

"...It's okay if I fail?"

"I don't mind."

"You might die, you know?"

"But I might not die too. Either way, I won't stop now after everything that's happened. I'm fine as long as you continue to be yourself, Rider. The way I see it, the fact that you're scared of what might happen to me if you fail... is also very much like you, Rider."

—Rider sighed in relief.

In other words, that was all he wanted to hear. That Sieg wouldn't be disappointed in him for becoming scared after regaining his reason. He absolutely hated the thought of disappointing the Master who he had chosen and who had chosen him in turn.

"—As long as you continue to be yourself, Rider."

Both the way he fears failure and his foolishness that fears no one is just like him. That's what his Master was saying.

In that case, the answer was simple. Rider would just do his best. Whether he succeeded or failed—doing his best was truly like him, after all.

“I see. You’re saying that it’s fine if I stay the way I am.”

“Yeah. That’s more than enough.”

Rider of Black tried to gloss over the tears in his eyes as he frantically wiped them.

“Yeah, you’re right! ...Yeah. Huh, how strange. Even though I was thinking of nothing but failure just now, suddenly I feel all calm. I feel like everything will go well!”

Sieg smiled happily at Rider, whose depressed expression had completely disappeared.

“All right, let’s depart! Don’t worry, I’ll protect you, Master! We’ve made it this far already, so let’s charge in boldly and grab our happy ending!”

In complete reversal from when they’d come here, Rider grabbed Sieg’s arm and pulled him along to go back to the rest of the group. Though a bit confused, Sieg understood that his Servant had somehow cheered up, making him feel relieved.

And at the same time, he held an unexplainable, sad conviction—that having his arm pulled along again and again like this would soon come to an end.

Even if everything went well in every way—Sieg was certain that they couldn’t avoid an eternal farewell.

...Ruler wanted to believe that the pain in her heart was just her imagination. But the hot ache spreading in her chest told her that it wasn’t.

It wasn’t that she was hurt by Sieg and Rider’s conversation. The two of them completely understood each other as Master and Servant. That was a good thing. Mutual misunderstandings between Master and Servant could only lead to tragedy.

She wasn’t narrow-minded enough to be jealous of that. What pained her was just one thing. The words that Sieg had casually said.

"The very fact that I'm standing here right now is already miraculous."

That's right. It truly was a miracle. Ruler had brought him all the way here. Of course, it was a path that Sieg had chosen himself. She hadn't forced him. She'd even rebuked him for it. But in the end, he had arrived here.

It was both his choice and her choice. And yet, she still couldn't get rid of the feeling that he had arrived here *as if intentionally guided here*.

Ruler wanted to know the reason for his presence here.

...At the same time, she didn't want to know. If she learned the reason, she felt as if she would be crushed by guilt for bringing him with her this far.

But what pained her most was the thought of what Sieg himself might think.

If he understood that she had intentionally guided him here, he would probably scorn her. He would loathe her. He would probably see her as a reaper who had pushed misfortune unto him—

She couldn't bear it.

She was used to being slandered. She'd even experienced people using her and then suddenly coldly abandoning her.

But she couldn't endure the thought of betraying someone who had believed in her with innocent trust. Even more so since he was the boy who the girl inside her, Laetitia, had feelings for.

Aah—her heart hurt so much it felt like her very veins were in pain from the blood pumping through her heart to the point of bursting.

She wanted to reveal everything to him. She wanted to confess and ask for his forgiveness. But that would just hurt him instead of her.

Besides, it wasn't certain yet that the worst would happen. Even if it was true that he had reached here due to some higher 'will'... Even if he was chosen to be the 'destroyer' of the Holy Grail, it wouldn't necessarily require his life to accomplish it.

True, he could turn into Saber of Black, but he wasn't *Saber of Black himself*.

All she could do was hold onto that faint hope.

Those black Command Spells, and the impossible phenomenon of a homunculus turning into a Servant, even if for only three minutes. That was a frightening miracle that chipped away at one's life and had to be sacrificing something in exchange.

Ruler was filled with dread at the thought of what result it would ultimately lead it.

An ending filled with nothing but sorrow—she absolutely wouldn't allow it to happen.

"...It's time. We should get going now."

"Huh? Now that I think about it, what about the pilots? I can pilot a plane, but the remaining nine..."

"Don't worry. We've put golems installed with the skill to pilot in all ten planes. They're golems that Roche originally created, so their ability is guaranteed."

Being capable of 'expanding' their techniques and abilities after their initial creation according to need was one of the advantages of golems. Fortunately, they still had some humanoid golems that Roche had made left, and it was simple to install abilities that he designed beforehand into them.

"We'll be boarding this plane, so this is where we part."

From this point on, Fiore would be acting independently of her Servant Archer.

Since they would surely clash with Rider of Red, who could fly through the skies, before they reached the Hanging Gardens, it was very likely that Fiore would get caught up in their battle if she stayed with Archer.

As much as it made her feel lonely, having Archer ride a different plane was the correct decision.

“...Archer. May the fortunes of war be with you.”

“Thank you, Fiore. I will obtain victory for you.”

Fiore shook her head at her Servant’s words.

“There’s no need to do it for me. It’s you that matters most here. I want you to fight to your heart’s content. —I permit you to use your Noble Phantasm as you see fit. There’s no need to wait for orders from me. If you feel that you should use it, please do so.”

Archer solemnly nodded. Her words meant that she was abandoning any intention of interfering in his battle and was entrusting everything to him. This wasn’t an act of irresponsibility, but rather proof of her absolute trust in her Servant.

“Then, we should get going.”

“Yes... Let’s meet again at the Hanging Gardens.”

They were very curt words of farewell. Fiore stifled the regret at parting inside her—and gave him a final smile as she left his side. She thought that bursting into tears would be shameful. Her Servant also understood that, which was why he didn’t speak to her more than necessary, in order to protect that resolve of hers.

“Archer.”

“Yes. I wish you luck as well, Caules-dono. And, about my Master—”

“No need to even ask... Go beat Rider of Red, Archer.”

Caules ended his farewell with a last wave of his hand. As if nothing had happened between them at all, he then pushed his sister’s wheelchair towards their plane.

“Don’t die, you two!”

The two siblings couldn’t help smiling wryly at Rider of Black’s rude farewell. Caules turned around and called out to him with an exasperated expression.

“Right back at you, Rider. Don’t get carried away and die by mistake.”

“I-I never get carried away! Stupid, stupid!”

"No, you do," murmured Sieg next to Rider. However, it was certainly true that Rider was stronger when he got carried away than not.

"Caules... Are you really fine with coming?"

Fiore questioned her younger brother one final time as he pushed her wheelchair. Fiore was going off to a deadly battleground out of her sense of responsibility as a Master. But even if Caules was technically Archer's second Master, it wouldn't pose much impediment to Archer's prana supply if he didn't come.

...That reasoning was correct. It was correct, but Caules still rejected it.

"I'm your younger brother. Isn't that reason enough?"

—*What truly human-like words.*

Fiore smiled at that thought. Normally speaking, such upright, human-like words should be avoided by magi. A proper magus wouldn't and shouldn't stick their heads into such an absurd situation.

"Besides, it's not often that a mere magus gets the chance to witness magecraft from the Age of Gods."

And in contrast, those were truly words befitting a magus. Magi wouldn't risk their own lives so easily. But it was a different matter when it came to magecraft. And the magecraft used by Assassin of Red — Semiramis — were truly miracles from the Age of Gods. If magi could get the chance to witness it, risking their lives was a cheap price.

Hearing that, Fiore nodded, feeling slightly relieved.

Compared to the likes of Fiore, Caules seemed to have much greater self-awareness as their family's successor and resolve as a magus, irreplaceably important things to have when walking the path of magecraft—

"Then, I'll be heading off next."

After seeing off the two siblings, Archer chose the plane he would ride. To him, any plane besides the one his Master rode was fine with him.

In the first place, the planes were merely footholds to Archer, whose job was to intercept Rider of Red.

“Archer!”

Archer turned around at Rider of Black’s call. Rider made the victory sign with his hand at him while wearing a beaming smile.

“Make sure to win! It’s embarrassing if the teacher loses to his student!”

“—Yes, it’s just as you say. I lived a long life, but I’ve never allowed myself to lose to my students even once, at least. In that case, I have to make sure to win.”

After replying that in a light tone, Archer boarded his plane.

“Yeah, in that condition, he’ll probably be fine.”

“In that case, I’ll be going as well.”

After performing consecrations on the planes loaded with explosives, Ruler would be boarding a different plane.

To her, the one unfortunate aspect of this plan was that she would be acting separately from Sieg from here on.

To act as the flagbearer who led the front charge—that was Ruler’s duty in their plan to board the Hanging Gardens.

“Be careful, Ruler.”

Ruler smiled faintly at Sieg’s words. Sieg felt that that smile was oddly sad for some reason.

“Sieg-kun, please try not to anything excessive. I know it goes without saying at this point, but—”

“Transforming a third time is forbidden, right? I know.”

Ruler had repeatedly told him that at every opportunity over the past several days. The way she said it was always strangely pressing, so even Sieg had to nod in acquiescence.

—However, this isn’t a situation where I can likely afford not to transform at some point.

Suddenly, Ruler’s expression became downcast.

“...Even I understand, you know. Under these circumstances, there’s no way you won’t transform, Sieg-kun. You’re unmistakably a Master, and you *chose* to fight. There’s no way you won’t end up using your power.”

She spoke as if she’d read his thoughts. Sieg sighed. Just as expected, Ruler also seemed to understand. There was no way to stop him besides making him withdraw from the Great Holy Grail War.

The homunculus Sieg had chosen to fight out of his own will. Even Ruler couldn’t stop him with words at this point.

Ruler couldn’t say it. She was too scared to say it, and she understood that, even if she did—his determination would remain unchanged.

Even if you chose to fight not out of your own will, but because of fate?

What if you’ve been caught up in a great unstoppable flow and are subject to a destiny that can’t be resisted?

*And what if what aided that process was **none** than me due to having received a revelation?*

“...What’s wrong?”

—What would you think of me then?

“It’s nothing. Then, Sieg-kun, let’s meet again at the Gardens.”

After bidding farewell to him with a smile, Ruler turned her back on Sieg and Rider of Black. She went to board the plane that Fiore had instructed her to, and Sieg tilted his head in puzzlement as he saw her off.

“Is it just me, or did she seem like she wanted to say something?”

“If she had something she wanted to say, Ruler would properly say it. Just now, she probably had something she wanted to say but couldn’t.”

“Do you know what it is, Rider?”

"I don't. Ah, but, well—"

Rider looked at Sieg with a pleased expression.

"She cares deeply for you. That much is certain!"

Rider grinned and hit Sieg on the back, apparently amused by something. The hit didn't hurt, but Sieg coughed from having been taken by surprise.

She cares deeply for you. Sieg repeated those words in his mind. Just the fact that she cared deeply for a homunculus like him made him feel happy somehow.

"Now then, Master. Let's get going too!"

"Yeah... Let's go, Rider."

Sieg swore to himself that he would survive this battle. He had to properly ascertain the right timing to use his remaining three transformations—no, if he followed Ruler's advice, then it was only two transformations.

When they boarded the plane, the interior was naturally empty of any other people. His curiosity-filled Servant went to peek at the golem in the cockpit, but Sieg wasn't all that interested himself and so just chose a random seat to sit down and wait for their departure.

As he looked around the plane, what caught his eye was an Ouija board that clearly didn't belong in an airplane. The board had old-style alphabet letters and numbers carved into its surface. Attached on top of it was a needle like that of a record player and a cable, and the other end of the cable was attached to an old-fashioned metal pipe. Sieg surmised that it was a wireless communicator used by magi.

Besides the board, there wasn't anything else in the plane that had been added or remodelled. There were no defenses against magecraft installed either... Though, considering the power of their enemy, even if Fiore had spent Yggdmillennia's entire fortune on reinforcing and upgrading the planes, it would only increase the time it took for the planes to be destroyed from ten seconds to fifteen seconds.

Though Sieg had some basic knowledge about airplanes, he hadn't thought the interior would be so big and spacious. A flight spell was so simple that even a novice magus could learn it. But it had taken ordinary humans two thousand years to create this kind of aircraft without magecraft.

Their advancement was slow, but certain. Meanwhile, magecraft kept going further and further beyond humanity's limits—but where was that path leading to now?

"Sorry for making you wait."

As Sieg was internally marveling over the differences between science and magecraft, Rider came back from the cockpit. He cheerfully reported that a big stone spider-like golem was in the pilot's seat.

"It's almost time, Master."

Sitting in the seat next to Sieg, Rider waved his legs up and down in unconstrained excitement.

"Ah, right, it's probably better to summon him now. Come out, Hippogriff!"

Before Sieg could stop him, Rider summoned his hippogriff. The materialized hippogriff was, as expected, confused by his current surroundings and gazed over the cramped plane interior restlessly.

"Sit!"

Seeming to be well trained, the hippogriff sat down, conspicuously destroying several seats in his way in the process.

"All that's left is the book."

Rider materialized his Noble Phantasm—**Luna Break Manual: Universal Magic Guide** (Temporary Name). Both the hippogriff and the time were Noble Phantasms containing enormous power, and as a result—they were easy to detect if the Red Servants choose to search for prana signatures.

This was another part of Fiore's plan. Both Archer of Black and Ruler were powerful Servants with strong prana signatures. By having them each protect different planes, it made it harder for the Red camp to concentrate their attacks on a single target.

Archer of Black would intercept Rider of Red and Ruler would intercept Archer and Lancer of Red. And Rider of Black—would tackle Assassin of Red's temple Noble Phantasm, the **Hanging Gardens of Babylon: Aerial Gardens of Vanity**, as a rematch after his defeat against her last time.

However, he had been shot down completely after a single attack last time. Therefore—this time, he had to draw out the tome's true name.

"...Ah. Looks like we're about to depart."

Rider noticed that the plane had begun to move. Sieg, who'd been reading the in-flight manual to kill time, dutifully put on his seat belt.

"Is there any point in that?" asked Rider.

"Probably not. If the plane falls, it'll be due to a Servant's attack, and even if it falls without being destroyed, you'll save me, right, Rider?"

"Ahaha, of course."

As they chatted nonchalantly, they felt a slight pressure weigh down on their bodies. The jumbo jet's four giant turbo fan engines began to roar loudly.

Suddenly, the Ouija board's needle began to move. The needle pointed at certain letters and numbers while releasing a creaking sound. After a while, a voice came out of the board.

"*Can you hear me, Rider?*" said Fiore's voice.

Rider picked up the transmitter to respond.

"I can hear you. Can you hear me? Testing, testing."

"...Your voice is too loud. Please move your mouth away from the communicator a bit. Ruler has roughly grasped the location of the Hanging Gardens, but she can't say when and where we'll reach it. Make sure to keep on guard, okay?"

"I get it, I get it! It'll be fine, don't worry!"

"*Naturally, you've already remembered the tome's true name, right?*"

".....Yeah!"

"*Wait. What was that long pause for—!?*"

Click. Rider flipped off the Ouija board's power and turned his face away in feigned innocence. Then, he seemed to remember Sieg's presence and trembled a little.

"...It'll be fine, right?"

"Don't worry. I believe in you."

Sieg neither got angry nor laughed, but merely nodded with a serious and honest expression. Of course, he already knew that this was the most effective way to put pressure on Rider. The hippogriff squawked as if to express agreement with Sieg.

"Ufufu. As long as my Master understands what kind of Servant I am, everything is good."

Rider of Black's smile was clearly stiff as he replied.

Immediately afterwards, the plane lifted off the ground gently. Sieg looked out the window—the lump of metal they were riding was soaring through the sky at several hundred kilometers per hour.

Below, Bucharest became tiny in the blink of an eye. The people on the streets weren't even the size of dots at this point. Their forms were indistinguishable amidst the dark town with only the tiny blinking lights from lamps visible.

The plane ascended further. Eventually, nothing could be seen outside the window—Sieg guessed that they were above the clouds now. The plane interior was brightly lit by the cabin lights, but the outside was painted completely black.

For the next while, all they could do was wait. Rider began eating treats he apparently got at the airport while sharing one with the hippogriff. The hippogriff scowled after one taste and spit it out, but Rider continued eating with a beaming smile.

After a while, the Ouija board began moving again—another communication from someone was coming.

"...Sieg-kun, are you there?"

This time, Jeanne's voice came from the communicator. Sieg picked up the receiver.

"I'm here. What is it?"

“...”

Even though she was the one who had called, Ruler awkwardly sank into silence.

“Ruler?”

“Umm—why do airplanes fly?”

Then, without warning, she threw out that fundamental question.

“Err. They fly due to the flow of air released by the wings, I think. It’d take a while to fully explain, but why do you ask?”

“W-What would happen if the wings were torn off?”

“The plane would decelerate and fall. Of course, the same thing would happen if the engines stalled.”

“Wouldn’t that be really serious!?”

“...It would. Though, we probably wouldn’t have the time to think about that if it actually occurred.”

—More importantly, based on Ruler’s stressed tone...

“Ruler, could it be that you’re bad with airplanes?”

“Yes!”

Her reply was quite vigorous.

“I see... It’s unfortunate, but try to endure it. We can’t stop at this point, after all.”

“Uugh, I know that. I know, but—”

Even if she understood, scary things were scary and unpleasant things were unpleasant. Sieg pondered a little, and then tried to speak to her reassuringly.

“It’ll be over soon... Though, it’d be a real problem if the Hanging Gardens is also no good for you, considering how it floats in the sky.”

“Ah, that’s not an issue for me. The Hanging Gardens is powered by magecraft and prana, after all.”

From Sieg's perspective, something flying using magecraft was more untrustworthy than an airplane. A machine didn't make mistakes. A machine merely got work out and tired; as long as a proper machine was made properly using the proper procedure, it would merely abide by physical laws.

However, it was true that, from the perspective of someone from the 15th century, machines were probably far more untrustworthy than any kind of mysticism. It was common sense to them that metal cracked and broke. Humans had spent hundreds of years making durable metals and advanced to the point of making materials that could withstand precise flight—but its appearance hadn't changed at all.

"You should trust humans and the science that humans have cultivated a bit more. Well, I might not be in a position to say this as a homunculus myself, though..."

After Sieg said that, Ruler turned silent, as if his words had caught her off guard somehow.

After a while, she let out a small sigh of admiration.

"...You're right. There's no point if I don't believe in what humans had cultivated. The fact that airplanes fly is the crystallization of hard work that doesn't rely on magecraft. Making a lump of metal like this fly truly is a miracle!"

"Yeah, I get the feeling your trust in it is still a bit shaky, but as long as you understand—"

Sieg cut off his words as he heard Ruler suddenly draw in a sharp breath.

"Ruler?"

"Tell Rider to get ready."

The hippogriff growled in apparent warning.

"—Oops, looks like this is it. We've arrived, Master."

Upon hearing Rider's grim tone, Sieg took a moment to take a deep breath. He felt like the air itself was burning. His acute sense of smell as a homunculus detected the huge swirl of prana lying ahead of them.

"All right, get on, Master!"

Rider lightly tapped the hippogriff's neck and lightly jumped on its back. Rider held out his hand, and Sieg firmly grabbed it.

The very existence of the temple Noble Phantasm **Hanging Gardens of Babylon** was miraculous in itself, but the basement room containing the 'altar' that stored the Greater Grail was an especially strange room within the gardens.

First, its size was clearly abnormal. Considering the total size of the Hanging Gardens, there was no way for there to be any space within so huge its walls were out of sight, but even someone with eyes accustomed to darkness couldn't see where this vast room ended. Most likely, space was being distorted here through some form of magecraft.

The floor and walls were all rough and uneven like mortar, except for the area at the center of the room, where the floor was completely smooth. Beyond a series of sun-dried brick stairs that led to the very center, the stolen Fuyuki Greater Grail hovered motionlessly in the air.

It faintly radiated a pale light, looking as if the moon itself had been summoned into this room.

But what was even more astonishing was this room's ceiling... in other words, the part that served as the 'sky' here.

There was 'water' running along the ceiling. *It was an upside down lake.* Upon its surface floated lotuses of a myriad of vibrant colors—it was like looking at rainbow-colored sky.

This phenomenon was brought about by the concept of reversal that ruled over the Hanging Gardens. The water flowed *upwards* from the ceiling to the space above, and that water went on to fill the *ceiling* in the throne room.

In other words, the water-filled ceilings of this altar room and the throne room were linked, and it was impossible to tell which one was actually located in the basement of the gardens.

"Dear me... I feel like my sense of reality turns topsy-turvy every time I come to this place."

Caster of Red smiled wryly as he looked at the ceiling. Ripples occasionally spread through the water in the sky due to the mana filling the Greater Grail.

Caster of Red—Shakespeare—was a man who'd been born in an era where magecraft and mysteries weren't openly exposed to the public. He'd had virtually no opportunity to witness shamans cause a miracle through prayers to their objects of worship or famous magi display impossible phenomena.

Clairvoyant witches and curses were commonplace in his stories—but those were merely products of Shakespeare's imagination. The range of his imagination was limitless and could perform terrifyingly huge leaps that could picture anything in detail.

That's why it was rare for him to express amazement and awe like this. However, that was perhaps only natural considering the sheer abnormality of the Hanging Gardens and the Greater Grail.

Shirou Kotomine was standing directly below the Greater Grail in the center of the room.

Upon noticing Caster's arrival, Shirou lightly waved his hand in greeting.

"Caster. My Noble Phantasms are ready."

"Yes, Master. I've also finished preparing my Noble Phantasm."

Amakusa Shirou Tokisada's Noble Phantasms—**Right Hand, Evil Eater: Right Arm, Transgression Consumption** and **Left Hand, Xanadu Matrix: Left Arm, Foundation of Heaven's Gift**.

Caster of Red's Noble Phantasm—**First Folio: Let the Curtains Rise to Thunderous Applause**.

Their respective Noble Phantasms were neither weapons bestowed by the gods nor famous mounts obtained during adventures.

Shirou's Noble Phantasms were the materialization of the miracles he had bestowed onto people in life.

Caster of Red's Noble Phantasm was the [book] he had never managed to write during his lifetime.

Either way, these Noble Phantasms were merely the embodiment of their legends.

Neither one could face an army, let alone destroy a fortress. In terms of Servant rankings, they were both undoubtedly third-rate.

But, only at this very moment—only when they combined their Noble Phantasms together was their value completely upturned.

A holy sword or a divine spear could destroy the Greater Grail.

But among the Servants in the Great Holy Grail War, the only ones who could *take control* of the Greater Grail were these two.

“I’ve already connected the ‘thread’. It’s what supplies the prana to you and the other Servants, after all.”

The only Servant who Shirou Kotomine actually supplied prana to as a Master was Assassin of Red. The other Red Servants were merely connected to him through the basic Master-Servant contract, while their prana supply was provided from the Greater Grail, which he’d himself linked to after stealing it.

Just creating that link had required significant time. He’d searched for a method to accomplish it for several days after stealing it and had only managed to finally form the prana supply connection through the help of Assassin.

An ordinary mage like Darnic, who wasn’t from the great alchemist Einzbern family who had created the Greater Grail, had likely required decades just to touch the Grail’s system.

But both the Einzberns and Darnic had merely adjusted its system rather than control the Greater Grails itself. In other words, they had merely activated or slightly improved its original functions.

Basically, their actions had been limited to switching it On and Off. But what Shirou was about to attempt was something fundamentally different.

To put it simply, he was going to create a new switch. He wasn’t adjusting the system, but adding in a new system. He was remaking it into a Greater Grail that suited his needs.

Servants were summoned to the present age through the Greater Grail. Therefore, reprogramming the Greater Grail went beyond dangerous and into the realm of sheer insanity for a Servant like Shirou. Even if all his preparations were perfect.

That's why, to Shirou, this was his true battle. All the battles until now had merely been preparations and groundwork. Even if he lost them, he could still make another move.

But this was completely different. If Shirou lost here, he would come to an *end*. And if he was gone, everything would be brought to naught—the salvation of humanity would end in failure.

The light tremble in Shirou's hands wasn't from excitement. It was from the fear of knowing everything would end if he lost.

“—Even so, you're still here, Master.”

“Yes. After thinking and agonizing over the correct choice for sixty years, I chose to be here. Even if I feel fear, I have no regrets. Then Caster, let's begin the preparations—but before that.”

“Oh?”

Shirou held out one arm towards Caster. His Command Spells were faintly glowing.

Caster's face immediately stiffened.

“...Master?”

“Caster. I respect and trust you as a writer from the bottom of my heart. And that's precisely why I understand. You surely *want to write a tragedy*. Therefore, this is a necessary piece of insurance.”

With a radiant smile, Shirou used up a Command Spell.

“I order you with a Command Spell. Caster, *don't write a tragedy for my story*.”

“Guh...!!”

The expended Command Spell bounded Caster like a chain.

The Command was an order with absolute authority created by the Makiri and capable of firmly binding not only a Servant's body but even their mind. And wording the order not as 'forbidding betrayal', but as 'not writing a tragedy', made it bind Caster of Red even more tightly.

"Master... Such treatment is too awful. This is cruel, far too cruel."

Caster of Red loudly lamented—but that was only natural.

"No, I already told you, remember? I trust you as a writer. You want to write a tragedy. But if I questioned you about it, you would have to lie. So I never once asked you 'Do you want to write a tragedy?' until now... If never questioned, you would have no reason to lie, after all."

Despite his groaning, Caster of Red had to acknowledge that. It would be a lie if he said that he didn't intend to write a tragedy. He had thought about not writing one—but when the time came to write, his pen would *naturally plunge towards writing a tragedy on its own*. The only way to prevent that was for him to decide to write a comedy from the start.

Caster loudly sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well, I will do as you wish. After all, [Sweet are the uses of adversity, which like the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head]."

"Thank you. I thought restricting the genre of a story would be rude towards the most famous writer known today, though."

"Fufu, being called a famous writer is embarrassing. I'd prefer it if you gave me such praise after reading my works—"

"Yes, I made sure to read your Four Great Tragedies, at least, before today. That's why I decided to use a Command Spell."

"...I see."

What a blunder, thought Caster as he held his head in his hands at the irony. *Perhaps I shouldn't have told him to read my works... No, no, having others read one's stories is precisely what makes a writer a writer.*

In the first place, this man had already experienced the worst possible tragedy. The thirty-seven thousand people who followed him were massacred and he lost his own life as well. His was a tale of crawling out from the pit of despair and overturning that fate of misfortune.

In that case—he had to continue to climb up even now. Even if God allowed him to walk away from his path in this situation, a writer never would.

“I promise to use all my might to write a happy ending instead of a tragedy, Master.”

“Thank you, and sorry for the imposition... Now then, let’s begin.”

“—*You’re so slow. I was wondering when you would finally start.*”

Assassin communicated her clear displeasure through telepathy. Her words were heard by Caster of Red as well. Shirou looked up at the water canopy and apologized with a smile.

“Sorry. —We’re beginning now.”

“*Worst comes to worst, I will discard you. Understood?*”

How terrifying, thought Caster with a slight chill down his back. There was not an even the smallest trace of emotion in her words, words which a Servant should never direct at their Master under any circumstances.

“Of course. That’s only natural.”

...And even more terrifying was Shirou’s reply, far too bright in face of such unfeeling and merciless words.

He wasn’t unworried because he thought his Servant *wouldn’t* do such a thing. There was no way that Assassin was that naïve. In the worst case scenario, she really would choose to abandon him in order to protect herself.

Which one could be considered madder, a Servant who would unhesitantly betray her Master or a Master who would happily accept that?

“*Good. Then begin, Shirou. And win. Failure is not allowed.*”

Assassin’s words remained unfeeling, but Shirou Kotomine expressed gratitude from the bottom of his heart.

“—Thank you, Assassin.”

Shirou smoothly took off his stela and mantle. He took off his cassock and undershirt as well, leaving his upper body naked. His tanned skin

had countless sword scars and fire burns carved into it. In Caster's eyes, his body expressed great sorrow rather than ugliness.

Shirou then lifted his arms up above him. He opened his palms, as if to make the Greater Grail his by grabbing it.

His arms were filled with a different radiance than that of the faintly shining Command Spells—Shirou Kotomine's miracle, his dual Noble Phantasms, were activating.

"Then I'll start first."

Shirou began to walk with graceful footsteps towards the Greater Grail hovering in the air. As Caster watched him, he was suddenly beset by the illusion that Shirou was walking on a staircase made of corpses.

The corpses that served as building material for the stairs were the victims who had been eradicated for believing in a faith different from the native religion and following Amakusa Shirou Tokisada. They didn't feel sadness at being trodden over. In fact, it was clear that they felt joy, even.

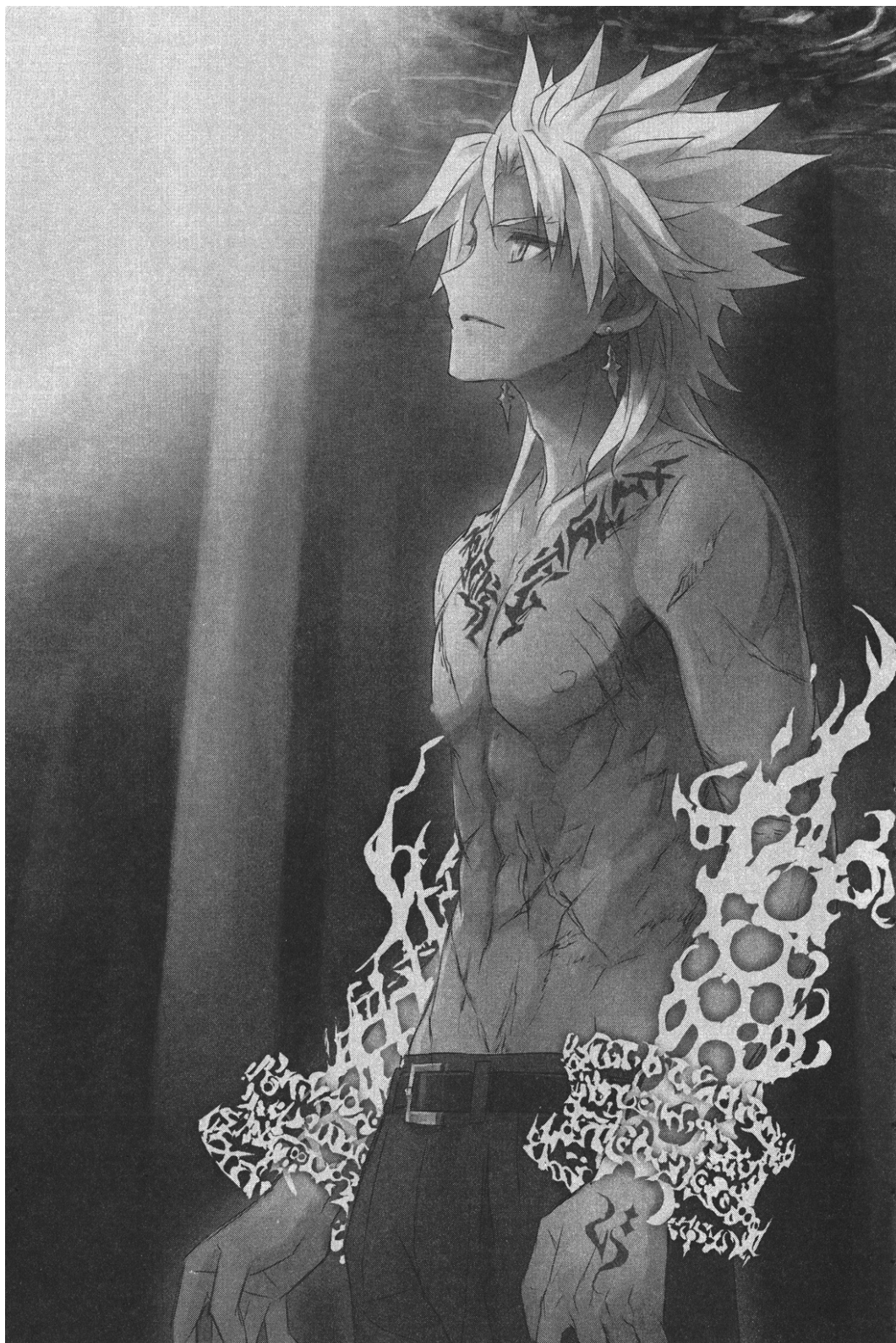
They were grateful from the bottom of their hearts that they'd become sacrifices for saving the world—. It was an illusion, just an illusion, but if these corpses from the past knew of what was happening now, wouldn't they say the same thing?

That was what Caster of Red believed.

As he walked towards the canopy and the Holy Grail, Shirou thought back on the seventeen years of his first life and the sixty years of his second life.

He had devoted everything for this moment. He had lived with the resolve to sacrifice everything.

Right now, hundreds of millions of lives, and human goodness itself, rested on his shoulders. It was so heavy he felt like was going to be crushed, but there was no sign of agony on his face.



—*I won't lose.*

Shirou took the first step, and connected to the Greater Grail through the 'thread' he'd made while establishing a prana supply connection—

Instantly, his world turned upside down.

His existence was instantly fused with it. He was overcome by a comfortable feeling like when one is about to fall asleep, and the sensation continued infinitely. He was engulfed by something soft, and kept sinking without end—down, down, down.

Any malice, no matter how strong, would vanish here.

Any desire to kill, no matter how great, would be useless in the face of this.

This entire space, filled with happiness, peace, pleasure, order and purity all mixed together, felt like sweet milk dripping over his entire body.

His brain's functions halted.

His brain's functions became unnecessary.

Thought and instinct are unneeded. So melt away. Melt away and become one with it, until you're reduced to mere sweet, formless milk—

“...You're in my way.”

Shirou rejected that supreme pleasure with extreme ease. He scrunched his face at the great pain that ran through his arms, but he felt relieved at the same time.

Shirou had touched *this* several times while linking with the Grail to connect the prana supply. He had clearly understood from those brief touches that he would likely become unable to think of anything and merely dissolve into it if he plunged his entire body into it. To prevent that, he'd made his arms feel pain. The reproduced pain came from the despair which he'd experienced in the past—and his black rage which sought to overcome it.

Shirou Kotomine couldn't forgive humans. He couldn't forgive human evil, nor human goodness either. It's precisely because humans possessing contradicting aspects of good and evil, greed and compassion, that they continue to exist as beings that repeat an endless spiral.

...He couldn't forgive that. As long as he had that rage and pain, Shirou could withstand even such comfortable pleasure. The interior of the Greater Grail was still swirling with enormous amounts of prana undyed by anything.

To maintain his 'self' while inside the Greater Grail was the first trial.

Images of various scenes whirled around Shirou like a revolving lantern. It reminded Shirou of a fast-forwarded film.

The images appeared to show the history of the Einzberns. Their origins went back two thousand years, and the start of their quest began one thousand years ago. They were a clan that had repeated a trial-and-error process of every possible method for the sake of their dream of completing the Holy Grail.

They glorified every gruesome sacrifice they made and flung off every setback. Simply calling it 'obsession' wasn't sufficient; in fact, their struggles could even be likened to the journey of a saint.

Endless days without joy, of only battling with despair head on. The span of one thousand years made it seem like madness, but in truth it was merely a simple repetition of the same process.

Trial and failure, setback and restart. Even though it wasn't even clear whether they were moving forward or backwards, they just relentlessly continued to walk on.

Shirou honestly felt respect for them at the sight—and smiled wryly at the same time.

Receiving sympathy from someone like him who wasn't even a member of the Einzberns was merely a bother for them.

Even more so since he was the culprit who had stolen their Greater Grail.

It's true that the sight of their history was moving—but that's all it was, nothing more and nothing less. He remained silent until the fast-forwarded film ended.

A pale light engulfed the world once more. If he let his attention slip, he would dissolve in it, so he had to keep affirming his own existence every second.

There was no real direction here. Ahead laid the origin point of the Greater Grail. As he reinforced his strong determination to reach there, he began to walk.

Normally, the Greater Grail activated by using the Lesser Grail as fuel after it had absorbed the souls of Heroic Spirits. Once activated, the Greater Grail would create energy from it. Seven Servants were needed to fully activate it—but no Servants souls were absorbed into the current Lesser Grail yet.

The Lesser Grail, which had a hole gouged into it, was sealed in a small room within the gardens, where the concept of ‘up and down’ didn’t exist, and was continuously leaking out prana. No matter how many times the souls of Servant entered it, they would keep leaking out from the hole. But the leaked souls were unable to follow gravity in the room, and so they continued to be absorbed into the Lesser Grail and leak out again from the hole in an endless cycle.

Currently, Saber of Black, Lancer of Black, Berserker of Black, Caster of Black, Assassin of Black and Berserker of Red had all been killed, so the Greater Grail would automatically activate using the Lesser Grail as fuel after one more Servant was killed. This setup with the Lesser Grail was meant to prevent that.

If the Lesser Grail was destroyed, the Greater Grail might sense the abnormality and malfunction in some way. But if Shirou left it to operate normally, the Greater Grail would activate before he could finish changing its system.

Even he wouldn’t be able to touch the Greater Grail once it fully activated. He couldn’t let it activate—not yet, at least.

Shirou Kotomine wasn’t a magus. But still, he’d had sixty years to work on his objective. At this point, he was pretty much as knowledgeable as possible on the Holy Grail War and the magecraft connected to it.

With what he'd learned, he had to agree that the Greater Grail truly was the ultimate wish-granting device whose almighty power reached God's domain. Its system, having been designed minutely and elaborately to an abnormally high degree, definitely had the power to grant any Master's wish—and even reach the ****.

But no matter how enormous, divine and almighty it was, what lay at the core of this Greater Grail was a single woman.

Her name was Justeaze Lizrich von Einzbern. The head of the Einzberns who had become the nucleus of the Greater Grail.

The Saint of Winter who had sacrificed her own life and given up everything for the sake of realizing a miracle (Sorcery)—that was Shirou Kotomine's goal and destination. She held all of the grail's functions under her control.

There are stories of weapons that were made by sacrificing human lives, enchanted into true cursed swords by throwing a maiden into the hot molten iron.

But the Greater Grail was different from those. The Justeaze wasn't sacrificed to the Greater Grail. First, Justeaze existed, and then she *became the Greater Grail*.

Yes. The Greater Grail was both an almighty wish-granting device and also a giant pipeline (Magic Circuits) for the sake of reproducing the lost miracle of the Einzberns.

Normally, three things were necessary for a magus to perform magecraft. A spell foundation, Magic Circuits and prana. A spell foundation was the foundational system needed for any form of magecraft. Magi produced prana through the inner pathways known as Magic Circuits and performed spells based on a specific foundation.

And it was no different from the Greater Grail. This enormous Holy Grail was basically a cluster of Magic Circuits, and it could produce any miracle by using prana it absorbed from leylines.

The title almighty wish-granting device wasn't just for show. The Greater Grail was a meticulously-made and extremely precise device that contained an enormous store of prana worthy of being called 'almighty'.

But Amakusa Shirou Tokisada knew. The Greater Grail was *impartial*. Justeaze's personality was already gone—only her Magic Circuits still lived.

No matter what wish it was asked from the outside, the Holy Grail would grant it all. Then, if Shirou asked it to 'save humanity' from outside of it, would the Greater Grail bring about that salvation?

—Of course, the answer is no.

The Greater Grail *can't do what's impossible*. That's why Shirou was risking his very life to invade the Greater Grail. He had a wish that was impossible for even the Greater Grail—in that case, he merely had to overwrite its system from the inside and forcefully make the Greater Grail grant it.

He was attempting to adjust and reprogram the Greater Grail itself, something that would never be allowed in a normal Holy Grail War.

If it wouldn't grant his wish, then the *Holy Grail was the one that was mistaken*. So he would merely correct it.

Shirou walked towards what he had long sought—which surely lay beyond this expanse.

Several hours had already passed since Shirou had dived into the Greater Grail. He would probably require an even more considerable amount of time to complete his task. The Greater Grail was a work of art on the level of the divine, and Shirou was trying to modify it from its very foundation. There was no way he would finish quickly.

For the time being, Caster had returned to his study and resumed writing. It was then that he received a telepathic message from Assassin of Red.

"Caster, has Master already dived in?"

"Yes. Have there been any changes to his prana?"

"No. There've been no changes to the prana being supplied to us and the prana accumulating in the Hanging Gardens from him. I suppose this means that, even if the interior of the Greater Grail is another world entirely, the Line connecting Master and Servant can't be severed so easily."

Shirou had been most concerned about the moment he dived into the Greater Grail.

If his link to the rest of the world was cut off, everything would immediately fall apart.

“In that case, I shall continue with my writing.”

“Wait, Caster... There’s one thing I want to ask you. Is the end that you wish for my Master glory, or failure?”

Caster just barely managed to stop himself from doing a spit take at those words.

“Glory, of course.”

“I know, but I’m making sure just in case. If things go wrong and this plan is setback because of you, I’ll have you take responsibility—quite painfully so.”

“O Empress, have no fear. Our Master took precautions against that just earlier with a Command Spell. To my bitter disappointment... Ah, no, I of course didn’t have any intention of writing a tragedy from the start, though!”

“...Hmph. As if I could trust the words of a clown like you. Listen well, Caster. Your value as a writer lies only in the books you write. And the moment I judge that your books are not beneficial to us, I will lose any reason to keep you alive.”

Caster felt as if he’d been captured by a viscous carnivorous plant—though of course he kept that thought to himself.

If he said the wrong answer, he would be melted and digested in an instant. Assassin of Red was most likely the most skilled Servant in terms of cruelty in the Great Holy Grail War.

From what Caster saw, Assassin of Red was likely always evaluating whether to stealthily kill anyone and everyone in this world, including even her own Master. Even if someone had no killing intent and only the slightest ill will towards her—if she judged from their every word and attitude that they would cause harm to her, she would unhesitantly move to assassinate them.

This was the greatest reason why Rider and Archer kept their distance from Assassin. Of course, the fact that she was a figure of authority with the position of empress was part of it, but more importantly, she was

always planning to kill them from the start. Telling them to get along with her was the height of difficulty.

That's why the two of them detested her. The neutral Lancer should have noticed the empress' nature as well. However, he merely thought 'That's just how she is' and accepted it without reproach.

And to Caster, it was *only natural* that she be that way.

She was an empress who reigned far above others. She definitely wasn't a weakling, but she was better described as a person of undisputable and absolute authority than a strong warrior. And as a woman who had tricked and deceived everyone throughout her life, it was only self-evident that she wouldn't let her guard down even the slightest bit in the presence of others.

"I'd like to fervently advocate my existential worth as a court jester. I assure you that, while my books and writings are *always* imperfect, that is precisely what makes them beautiful stories."

"Imperfect? Not perfect?"

"That is only natural, O Empress of Assyria. A perfect existence, a perfect human being, and a perfect story constructed through only order and logic—are *completely shitty and boring!* [My salad days, when I was greenin judgement, cold in blood!] My stories are imperfect and therefore beautiful, are imperfect and therefore genuinely entertaining. Failures means death? I don't mind! There's a chance of failure, and we will have to pay the price if that happens! And *that's precisely why* I can rouse myself to excitement and write a masterpiece."

"Enough! Even through telepathy, your voice is loud and grating! I'll repeat myself one more time: failure is not allowed. Make sure to write Shirou's—Amakusa Shirou Tokisada's story right until the end."

Caster coolly smiled at those words, and chose that moment to pose a question he'd wanted to ask for a while now.

After all, their Master wasn't present right now. This was his best chance to hear her true feelings.

"Then allow me to ask you in return. O Empress, which do you want? Would you rather our Master's dearest wish be realized, or would you *enjoy trampling over his wish more?*"

—For a brief instant, Assassin’s breathing stopped as she was caught completely off guard by the question.

“The realization of his wish, obviously. A Servant serves their Master, after all.”

“...My, my.”

Though silent, Assassin was clearly dissatisfied by Caster’s response.

He was definitely the weakest of the remaining Servants that currently survived, and yet he feared no one.

“Such a perfunctory answer! Assassin, I’m asking if you want to see his destruction or not. Now, answer me!”

Pierced by the Caster’s words, Assassin realized that this was actually a serious question for a clown like him.

In that case, she also had to answer sincerely as an empress. If she spoke falsely, that would make her an even worse fool than a clown.

There were no retainers of hers present, so she had no choice but to reveal her true feelings. But, strangely enough, that seemed like an act of tremendous courage to her. But she had no one to rely on. Caster wouldn’t overlook her answer if she tried fawning upon him.

Focusing her nerves like never before, Assassin stripped away her many layers of falsehood—and spoke the truth.

“—I won’t deny that part of me wants to see him fail. I’m a woman who has no interest in virtue and generosity and enjoys the destruction and despair of others, after all. I’ve seen kings proud of their power fall into unsightliness and brave generals despair and run away in fear. But I’ve yet to see the despair of a saint. So I will admit that I want to see it.”

Assassin chuckled. Caster urged her to continue by remaining silent. A clown sometimes had to be patient and listen to a king’s words.

“But there’s something else I want to see. The scene that that man wishes to witness from the bottom of his heart. The salvation of humanity. A possibility that no one seriously considers, and that even heroes and saints have given up on. The same goes for me too. As someone who stands above others, I have witnessed various things, like untimely death, dazzling beauty, ugliness, pure

integrity—but that is the one thing I have never seen. It might be boring. It's possible that it might be a dull and dreary ending. But—I'll never know unless I see it first."

"I see. In other words, you mean to say that you want to see that ending not out of loyalty to your Master, but out of pure curiosity."

"Exactly. Of course, I also have my own wish to 'rule'. But, more than anything else—right now, I'm looking forwarding to seeing how far that man will go."

Just like a child playing with a toy—Caster just barely stopped himself from saying that out loud. Most likely, he'd be killed if he did.

"It seems you were about to say something insolent, but you did well to hold back for a man like you. As a reward for your silence, I'll forgive you."

Suddenly, Caster felt like a line was cut in his mind as Assassin closed the telepathic communication. But it was then that Caster remembered that he'd forgotten to ask one last question.

"What a blunder. I should have asked her if I could add in the love story of an empress. Now then, what to do—well, I'll just write it anyway. This will be well-received by readers, for sure."

Shakespeare took out a paper from his breast pocket and scribbled a note on it.

The empress fell in love.

And thus, he went to resume writing the main plot.

Since he was linked to Amakusa Shirou Tokisada as a Servant, he was able to record what happened around Shirou and Shirou's own mental state in great detail with his Master's permission.

This meant that his Master's thoughts and feelings were all laid bare to him, something a normal Master would never allow.

—And of course, Shirou Kotomine was far from ordinary.

Shakespeare was indisputably the most famous playwright in the world. Anyone who made him their Servant would be forced to make the ultimate choice.

Would they allow him to write down their story, encompassing their thoughts, habits and entire life, or not?

If they allowed it, Shakespeare would recount and extol their extraordinary life as far as his voice could carry.

And that story would sublimate into a Noble Phantasm. Shakespeare's pen could *affect even events and phenomena*, no matter how absurd or preposterous it may be. The only thing he couldn't write were *uninteresting events*. If he believed something was interesting as a writer, fate itself would be overturned to make it happen.

He wrote, wrote, and wrote.

Amakusa Shirou Tokisada was encountering various hardships and trials within the Greater Grail.

His dead father, his dead mother, and the comrades who had sworn to stand by his side.

All of them were appealing to him.

Take up a sword in your hand and use it. We have that right. You have the responsibility to avenge us—

Even while beset by anguish, he continued onward.

Then, if his comrades failed, what about his enemies?

The ones who had violated, trampled and thoroughly disgraced his comrades while laughing, manifestations of this world's malignant cancer. They were more than enough to make someone give up and despair at humans.

In the face of them, Amakusa Shirou—

“...Hmm!?”

Caster stopped his pen at the sudden tremor that rocked the gardens. The time was midnight. For a sudden tremor to occur in this situation—there could only be one reason.

“So you’ve come, holy maiden!”

Heartily laughing, Caster stood up and ran out of his study.

“It’s a battle against time now. But our Master is ignoring sleep and hurrying to speed up time as much as possible. Even if they make it in time, we’re protected by invincible swords and indomitable shields, and are encased in fortress as hard as a diamond. Now, what shall happen next!?”

At almost exactly the same time, Assassin of Red opened her eyes as she sat upon her throne.

“—Hmm, so they’ve come.”

She’d anticipated the enemies to come eventually, but they were slightly later than she’d predicted. Did their preparations take more time than expected, or was there another reason for their late arrival?

Either way, it didn’t change what had to be done.

“Archer, Rider... They’ve arrived. Intercept them. I don’t know what means of flight they used to get here, but there’s nothing that can withstand your attacks. Rider, crush them with your flying chariot.”

“Ah, I plan to, but it’ll probably take some time to take them all down.”

“...What? Did they use such a large-scale spell?”

“You’ll understand if you see.”

Assassin projected an image of the outside world onto the throne room’s ceiling—and was dumbfounded by what she saw.

“What is this — —?”

From the knowledge she’d been given by the Holy Grail, Assassin knew what an airplane was. A mechanical bird that petty humans had put together somehow or other to fly through the sky.

They were heading towards the gardens using that. That much was fine. It was a far more rational choice than using an enchanted tool that could go malfunction. But—there were far, far too many of them.

There were a total of ten large jumbo jets, approaching the Hanging Gardens like a flock of ravens. The prana signatures coming from them were vague and ambiguous, making it impossible to precisely detect who and what was on each plane.

And furthermore—

“Those damn Black Servants...!!”

Archer of Black was standing on the roof of one of the planes. His preparations for battle were already complete and he was searching through the surrounding skies with eyes that overlooked nothing.

Rider of Black was riding on top of the plane next to Archer’s. He was atop his hippogriff, with the homunculus who was his new Master sitting behind him.

And standing atop the center plane was the arbitrator of the Great Holy Grail War and the absolute enemy of the Red camp. The young woman who was acknowledged as a true saint and who opposed the young man who never managed to become a saint.

Class Ruler—Jeanne d’Arc.

“Relying on pure numbers... Hmph, what a foolish plan. But that’s precisely what makes it *hard to deal with*.”

The ten planes were approaching fast, so close they were almost on the verge of colliding with the Hanging Gardens. But conversely, felling one plane wouldn’t be enough to destroy their foothold. With Archer and Ruler’s physical abilities, they could jump to the next plane before the one they stood on fell.

“However... even that’s not enough to approach my Hanging Gardens.”

It was true that Assassin would have some difficulty dealing with this. But *that was all*. She could destroy all those lumps of iron merely by activating the garden’s defense functions.

However—that wouldn't be tasteful. Proudly displaying her great power was soothing in its own way, but the other heroes of the Red camp wouldn't agree to just slaughtering the enemy like that.

"Rider. I don't intend to attack until the enemy reaches a certain distance near the gardens. However—"

"Hey, Miss Empress, is that supposed to mean that I'll also get caught in the crossfire if I get close too?"

"Precisely. Does that dissatisfy you?" Assassin of Red replied calmly.

Rider of Red happily accepted that provocation.

"No, no problem at all... I'll kill Archer of Black, and while I'm at it, I'll take apart those flying pieces of scrap iron too."

Rider's voice, like that of a ferocious beast, caused a chill to run down Assassin's back.

A demi-god born from a hero and a goddess, the great hero of the Trojan War—but if you peeled those titles away, he was actually a monster who devoted everything to battle.

"Very well, I'll leave it to you."

However, that was an indispensable component for a hero. Cruelty, arrogance and a sense of pride that asserted that one's strength was absolute were what made heroes truly heroes.

"Archer. I'll leave the rear support to you. Make sure to shoot down each one of those planes."

"...No. I'm going to kill that annoying girl first."

Archer of Red's voice sounded as if it rang out from the very depths of the earth. Rider's voice had been that of a beast excited in a blazing frenzy, filled with only joy—the pure delight at fighting someone strong.

But Archer of Red's voice was different. It was clearly filled with hatred, decisively different from the cruel cheerfulness that most heroes possessed.

"—What?"

It was only natural that Assassin furrowed her brow suspiciously. From her point of view, Archer of Red was the type of hero who was easy to understand.

She enjoyed fighting the strong, had no dislike for battle in and of itself, and had no interest in good and evil or government. She treasured invisible things like honor and pride—

If she hated someone, it would only be the killer of her loved ones. However Ruler—the holy maiden of Orleans, Jeanne d’Arc—was far from being a person who would do such a thing. In the first place, Archer of Red shouldn’t have had anyone she cared about enough to love in this world.

“I’ll kill that woman! I have to kill that filthy murderer who pretends to be a saint. Don’t get in my way, Assassin...!”

And yet—Archer’s voice was filled with rage.

Assassin understood. This kind of hatred couldn’t be controlled. It was the kind that took precedence over anything, most likely making Archer deem not only the Red camp but even her own life meaningless in comparison.

Such hatred always caused chaos on the battlefield. Of course, if she could successfully defeat Ruler, then it wasn’t a problem.

However—

“Let her be, Miss Empress. Either way, my own opponent remains Archer of Black.”

Rider interjected into the telepathic conversation. Just as he said, Rider’s pride made him desire to fight his former teacher.

“...Very well. Rider of Black likely intends to try and invade the gardens with that meager monster of his. I’ll take care of him.”

In her eyes, Rider of Black was no more a threat than a fly.

“Lancer, you are to remain on standby until any of them manage to board. I’m busy with controlling the gardens, and it goes without saying that Caster cannot be relied upon. You’re entrusted with the final defense line.”

“—Understood.”

Hearing that quiet reply made Assassin feel relieved. Even if one of the three Red Servants in charge of intercepting the enemy were defeated in the worst case scenario, as long as he was here—the enemy wouldn't be able to take even a single step near the Greater Grail.

"In that case—slaughter them. The Greater Grail is ours!!"

"Aye!" Rider and Archer replied affirmatively.

The Black camp would win this battle if they reached the gardens.

And the Red camp would win if they prevented them from reaching the gardens.

Amakusa Shirou Tokisada aimed to save humanity, while Jeanne d'Arc was trying to prevent him from doing so. The final battle between the two sides began in a magnificent manner at the dead of night, seven thousand and five hundred meters above the Black Sea.

The holy flag in her hands fluttered violently in the fierce and piercingly cold wind. The young woman stood majestically atop one of the planes.

The superb view around her was a hell in the sky where ordinary humans couldn't exist.

Most likely, the prana from the Hanging Gardens was interfering and causing the planes to slow down the more they approached, with their current velocity now at a mere three hundred kilometers an hour. However, it was still fast enough that any human would be immediately blown off by the violent headwind. But as a Servant, Ruler was able to concentrate prana into her feet to remain firmly standing on the airplane's roof.

She was filled with maddening worry, but for this moment alone she concentrated on only what was in front of her. Both now and in the past, her duty was to be the flag bearer—to receive all attacks onto herself.

That was her contract (curse). As long as she stood holding this flag, she wouldn't lose to any hero from any time or place.

Saber.

Archer.

Lancer.

Rider.

Berserker.

Caster.

Assassin.

Not conforming to any of these seven classes, she was the aloof, absolute arbitrator.

Ruler—Jeanne d’Arc—stood at the vanguard just as she had in her first life.

In the sky at high altitudes that surpassed human reach, the Black camp at last caught sight of the **Hanging Gardens of Babylon**.

“—I see it!”

“Yes, *me* too.”

“I can see it too! Wow, it’s an amazing sight no matter how many times I see it!”

Inwardly, Ruler agreed with Rider of Black.

Assassin of Red’s Hanging Gardens could be best described as a huge, gold-shining birdcage. Seeing it fly through the sky was a wondrous sight straight out of fantasy.

And that birdcage was protected by not only the Red Servants, but also eleven pure black plates over twenty meters in length floating around the gardens, the **Tiamutomu Umu: Eleven Black Coffins**¹ which had shot Rider of Black down to the ground before.

In contrast, Ruler and the others were riding giant birds of steel flying straight towards the Hanging Gardens at full speed. Fortunately, the trajectory of the planes was extremely stable. Strangely enough, despite having been so nervous inside the plane, Ruler was now the height of calm as she stood on its roof.

1. This isn’t a Noble Phantasm per say, but rather a part of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The name is presumably in either Ancient Sumerian or Akkadian considering Assassin of Red’s identity, but since I have very little knowledge of those languages, I can’t guarantee correct spelling.

It appeared that her basis of fear lay with whether or not she could see the outside scenery.

*Ah, how truly like a bumpkin country girl—*She even had the composure to think such foolish jokes.

But it was about time for the laughter and smiles to end. What waited ahead was every form of despair that none could laugh at. And that was precisely why she was smiling now while she could.

She smiled humorously as she thought of Rider of Black, she smiled pleasantly at the charming relationship between Archer of Black and his Master, she smiled in admiration at the courage of Fiore's younger brother—and lastly, she wore a different smile as she thought of *him*.

Then, she suddenly stopped smiling.

Her gazes narrowed and turned grim. With her holy flag raised in one hand, she shouted out boldly and loudly.

“Amakusa Shirou Tokisada—!”

Ruler yelled out his name—but the one to respond was not him, but his Servant, Assassin of Red.

“What an unsightly howl. My Master is busy accomplishing the ‘salvation of humanity’ with the Greater Grail. Come, you might still make it in time if you hurry, you know?”

The telepathic communication forcefully rang through her mind, annoyingly loud.

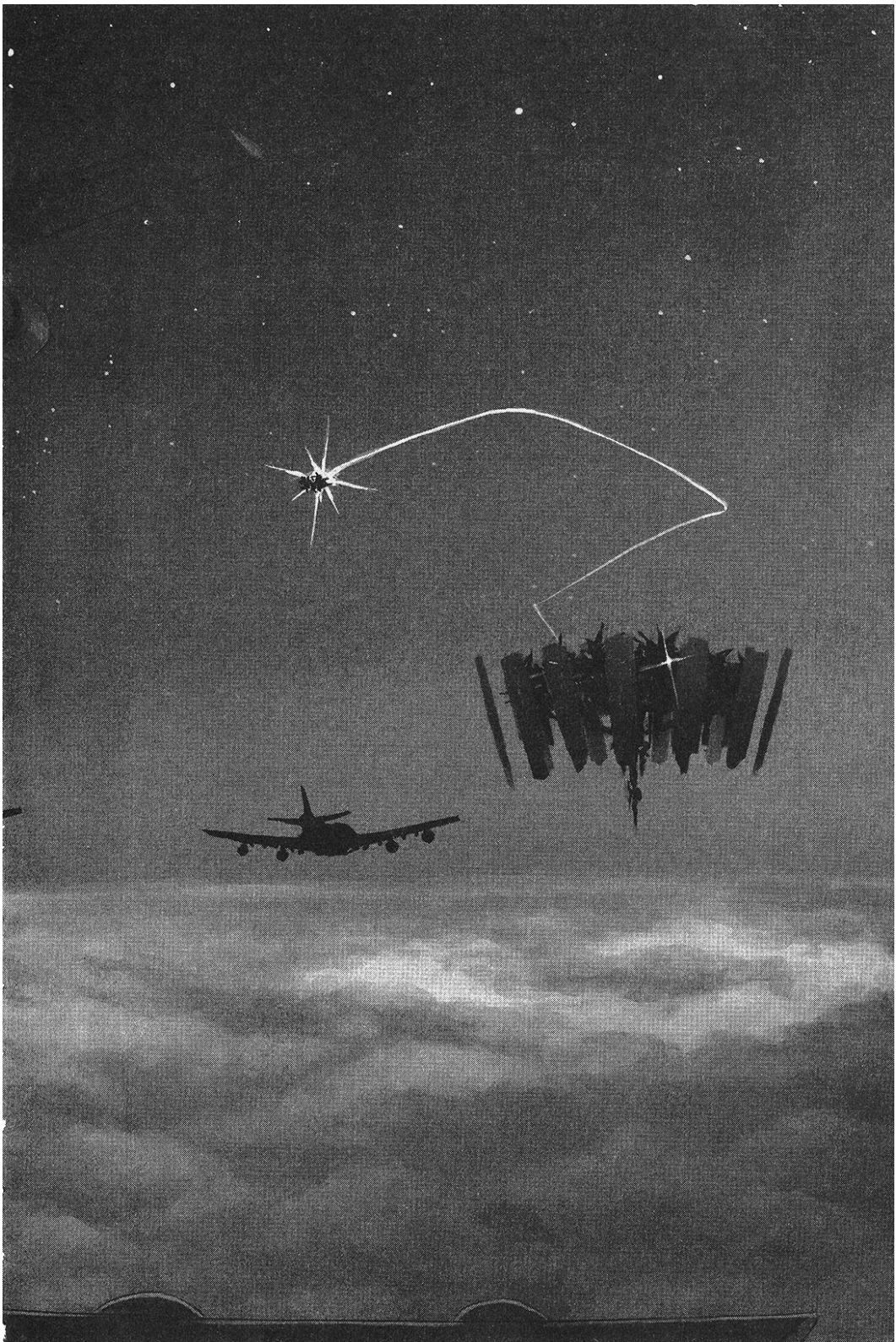
But there was more important information there to be concerned with.

“...He seriously intends to save humanity?”

In response to Ruler's question, Assassin snickered.

“Who knows? Whatever the results of his actions are, it is no concern of mine. If you want to stop my Master, you'll have to reach him. Though... only if you manage to get past the Red Servants first!”





Suddenly, an intense light flashed through the sky from the Hanging Gardens. That incredible torrent of prana—it was the three-horse chariot ridden by Rider of Red, the steeds neighing as they soared through the sky.

“Come, Archer of Black! It’s the promised time. Let’s enjoy ourselves!”

Soaring through the dark sky in a zigzagging pattern like a huge snake, Rider of Red charged at Archer of Black—!

Archer of Black’s eyesight possessed clairvoyance that could accurately grasp everything even in the midst of a pitch black night, but it was next to impossible even for his eyes to follow Rider of Red’s chariot. Whether it be strength, technique or speed, when one of these abilities in battle reached a level that far surpassed common sense, they became more than mere stat numbers—they were pure ‘weapons’ in their own right.

In that regard, the speed of Rider of Red’s chariot truly was a weapon.

It was impossible to avoid and impossible to defend against, and its charging power was tremendous. It was virtually perfect in both attack and defense—one of the pinnacles of what heroes could accomplish.

Moreover, Rider’s steeds weren’t ordinary horses. Two were the immortal divine horses Xanthus and Balius, given to him by the sea god Poseidon, and the third was Pedasos, the famous horse he obtained when capturing the city of Eetion.

The chariot’s name was **Troias Tragoidia: Tempestuous Immortal Chariot**. It was a Noble Phantasm possessing divine speed that could overtake everything in this world.

Who could possibly stop this comet that soared across the sky at light speed? Any living being that touched it would be instantly turned into crimson paste. And the same applied even to giant whale-sized precision machines created by humans.

The chariot soared up and then dropped down towards one of the airplanes like a shooting star. Naturally, he was aiming for the plane Archer of Black was standing on.

“I’ve got you!!”

Rider of Red's yell was filled with confidence. Just as he'd said earlier, airplanes were mere scrap iron before him.

The unpleasant sound of metal tearing apart rang through the air. Its fuselage was pierced during impact and the two torn halves of the planes lost control and immediately fell toward the sea below.

Rider didn't even have to watch to know that it would crash against the sea and shatter into thousands of small pieces. But there was no sign of Archer of Black on the felled plane. Figuring he had moved to one of the other planes next to it, Rider temporarily stopped his chariot and looked around around—but at that instant, one of his steeds neighed.

"What...!?"

Rider reflexively turned around—and he saw Archer of Black holding his bow ready and aiming straight at him. No, wrong. *He had already fired an arrow!*

It was virtually impossible to catch sight of an arrow shot on a night without moonlight and only the faint lights from the Hanging Gardens for illumination.

But Rider detected the swirl of prana and slight disturbance in the air, and he swiftly turned his head to the side.

Suddenly, the sound of grating teeth rang out—Rider of Red smiled fearlessly. Even Archer of Black was left speechless by what he'd done.

Rider had *caught and crushed* the arrow between his teeth. He had predicted that it was aimed for his forehead and, instead of avoiding it, stopped it head on.

"So there you are!!"

Rider of Red whipped at his steeds and resumed charging his 'chariot' that was more like a jackhammer.

His acceleration pierced the sound barrier in a mere instant. He flew in a spiral and ascended—and then did a sudden descent. The plane Archer of Black was standing on was crushed as if by a giant fist from the heavens.

Archer of Black ran and jumped off the crushed plane—and simultaneously fired more arrows as he did so. He shot three arrows in quick succession, all aimed straight at the nape Rider’s neck as he halted midair for an instant.

But that wasn’t enough to stop the chariot. There was no way it could be stopped.

—Just try and stop me, Archer of Black. Right now, I’m the indisputable fastest in the world!

The chariot charged as it cleaved through the darkness.

Archer of Black softly jumped onto another plane from the destroyed one, acting as if the dozens of meters between them and the whirling winds were nothing to him.

At the same time as he landed, he activated the program that had been installed in the piloting golem beforehand.

“Spin.”

Just as Rider of Red moved to chase after him, the whole plane performed a barrel roll. The reversed underside of the plane served as a shield that blocked Archer of Black from Rider’s sight. Archer used that chance to stealthily move to another plane again.

The plane blocking Rider’s vision ascended, but Rider didn’t chase after it.

Achilles wasn’t the type to keep falling for cheap tricks. He saw through it— Archer was no longer on the ascending plane and was now on another plane aiming at him!

Don’t underestimate me. Rider of Red charged and crashed straight into the ascending plane—a three hundred ton lump of metal. Archer of Black, who had drawn his bow in order to shoot Rider down along with the bait plane, was astonished at the sight.

It was one thing he Rider had merely pierced through the plane with his chariot. But... Archer couldn’t believe that he was *pushing the whole plane in front of him as he charged...*!

However, in reality, this now turned the plane into a huge shield that protected Rider from Archer’s arrows, and he was trying to crash it into

Archer...!

Archer immediately leapt back while firing his nocked arrow. He used the enormous prana emitted by it as a form of propulsion, while the arrow itself simultaneously pierced through the plane with the force of a missile and destroyed it.

However, that didn't stop Rider of Red. He struck the wrecked pieces of the plane with his spear and even used punches and kicks to launch them as projectiles.

They were more like machine gun fire than pellets. Archer of Black was forced to retreat back even further.

—Rider was certain that he was cornering Archer into a corner. His initial hesitation was gone now as well. The only thing that ruled his heart was the unimaginable joy of fighting the man he had once strived to match up to.

Rider wouldn't kill him. He would beat him. It was merely unavoidable that his opponent would die in the process. If he fought with all his strength and the result was the death of his enemy, then it couldn't be helped. His opponent was also surely excited at the prospect of beating him in return. They were fighting each other with everything they had. There was no room for sorrow there.

They ran, chased, shot and smashed. The great sage Chiron—Archer of Black—and the great hero Achilles—Rider of Red. The two Servants 'used up' yet another two jumbo jets with no hesitation at all.

In just a few short minutes, six planes had already been destroyed. There were four left. At this rate, all the planes would be felled within several minutes, and the Black camp would be forced to retire from the Great Holy Grail War as a result.

Of course, Rider of Red was at full strength, and even if he was reluctant for their battle to end in such a boring manner, he would still accept it as something that couldn't be helped if it decided the battle.

Archer of Black didn't wish for such an ending. And he knew that Rider of Red was using all his strength and taking advantage of the situation as well.

And then—at last, *Archer's adjustments were completed.*

"She's come."

"That hateful woman has come."

"That woman who killed those children has come."

Someone whispered those words. In response to that voice, Archer of Red grabbed her bow. She still hadn't realized that the whispers of the evil spirits had turned into her own words.

Low level evil spirits could only repeat the same whispers. They shouldn't have even have had the intelligence to change their words according to the situation.

So this was her own wish.

"Kill."

"Kill."

"Kill."

"Kill."

"Kill." "Kill." "Kill." "Kill." "Kill." "Kill." "Kill." "Kill." "Kill." "Kill."
"Kill." "Kill." "Kill." "Kill." "Kill." "Kill."

"Kill—"

Archer of Red smiled gently at the whispers and kissed her blackened right arm.

"Don't worry. I'll definitely kill that woman, that fraud of a saint."

Her killing intent had already become as sharp as a blade. Servants possessed strength and abilities that far surpassed humans, but at the same time, they were extremely human in nature.

Love strengthens people, and hatred grants even more power. Of course, both emotions could also lead to self-destruction at their most extreme—but the power they granted was more than worth it to Archer of Red, even if it came at the price of her own destruction.

Atalanta laughed and knocked an arrow on her bow. Even in the pitch-black darkness of night, her eyes accurately locked onto Ruler.

Ruler was holding up her holy flag on top of an airplane in a fearless and majestic manner. Naturally, Assassin of Red activated the defense functions of the Hanging Gardens in response.

A barrage of EX rank of orbs of light was fired from the black plates in quick succession. Each one was as devastating as a meteor falling from the sky. Its pure destructive power which carved through the sky was worthy of being called [Anti-Army].

—However, to put it another way, it was merely an interception spell that “had no merits besides its destructive power”.

Ruler swung her flag at the flood of light orbs—and just that was enough to make the concentrated prana disperse. Her EX rank Magic Resistance skill was part of it, but as expected Ruler’s *worst* ability lay in that holy flag.

As long as the holy maiden continues to swing her flag, we will know no defeat.

The pure and simple faith of the soldiers who had followed her. That faith had spread across the world along with Jeanne d’Arc’s fame and had taken form as a Noble Phantasm unique to the holy maiden.

It didn’t matter that the length of her history was shallow compared to Rider, Archer and Assassin of Red. Jeanne d’Arc was a saint who was, without exaggeration, known by everyone in the world.

In that case, the flag she now held was capable of brushing aside any and all harm no matter where she was.

Archer of Red figured that Assassin of Red was surely furious right now. After all, even if the Hanging Gardens was ‘vain’, it was still her pride.

An unrivaled and invincible floating fortress that could crush all enemies. Heroes could win against a chariot. They could win against a flying horse, or maybe even a dragon.

But they couldn't win against a fortress. In the first place, the terms 'victory' and 'defeat' were meaningless in the face of a fortress.

A fortress was something to be invaded and interception attacks were meant to be dodged; smashing an interception attack head-on shouldn't be possible.

"How annoying...!!"

In concert with that angry shout, more blasts of light danced hysterically through the air. They were completely in Archer of Red's way. The barrage wasn't pointless, but it was too wasteful.

...However, though it was wasteful, it wasn't pointless.

Ruler was a top-class Servant, but she wasn't all powerful. Even without her Command Spells, she exceeded the average Servant, but she still had her limits.

That was why Ruler had chosen to run away back when she first confronted Shirou Kotomine. Even excluding Archer and Rider of Red whose allegiance hadn't been decided back then, if Shirou attacked her in concert with Lancer, Assassin and the yet-unseen Caster of Red, it was extremely likely she would have lost even if she used her Command Spells.

Even her holy flag Noble Phantasm wasn't invincible.

Archer of Red could see that, while it was very gradual, her flag was starting to crack and tear. It was likely the cost of preventing all attacks from coming near her.

Jeanne d'Arc wasn't invincible in her legend. Though there had been various tricks and evil schemes involved, she had been turned into a prisoner at the end of her life.

In that case, Archer would keep firing arrows until Ruler's body could no longer endure it and she finally died.

"—Here I come, Ruler. I'll feed your corpse to the bears."

She drew back the bowstring and concentrated an enormous amount

of prana into the arrowhead. Her beast eyes precisely grasped the instant when Ruler looked at her.

She released her fingers—and the arrow instantly shot out with the arrow gushing huge waves of prana. It looked just like a swift, hungry wolf attacking its prey.

A direct hit from that would wound Lancer of Red, who boasted the greatest physical defense in the Greater Holy Grail War.

However, Ruler's holy flag expertly crushed the arrow in a swing so fast it looked like a flash and used the momentum to repel some of Assassin of Red's spell blasts while she was at it. She likely had consciously chosen the direction to scatter the blasts in, as the plane beneath her remained unharmed at least.

However, there was no way Archer of Red's attack would finish with just a single shot. The instant after she fired the arrow, she nocked another one and filled it with prana.

"Second and third shots ready. Set—Subjugate, Twin Stars."

She fired two arrows at the same time. If the previous shot was like a wolf, these twin shots, whose trajectories Archer freely controlled with prana, attacked Ruler just like wriggling, poisonous snakes—!

There's nothing she can do to defend, thought the ultimate huntress.

There's one thing I can do to defend, thought the arbitrator.

There were two enchanted arrows coming at her, and more light orbs had been fired from the Hanging Garden's defense mechanism **Tiamutomu Umu** as well.

At this point, it was impossible for Ruler to take conscious action. It was impossible to calculate which of the two arrows were flying at her faster.

Therefore, she partly cut off her thoughts and simply followed her instincts.

She swung her holy flag in a side sweep—and she repelled the light orbs which were shot from a shorter distance. However, now she couldn't block the arrows which were falling straight at her from above.

However, even if she couldn't block them, she could guide the course of events.

“What—!?”

It was only natural for Archer of Red to be shocked. Her arrows, which she was certain couldn't be avoided, had been intercepted by light orbs from the gardens.

Immediately after Ruler had intercepted the light orbs, she'd shifted direction and reflected them above her head. It was an unsightly display of intersecting fire by allies—Archer of Red became enraged.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrr!”

With that roar, Archer jumped out. Her fastest sprint using her divine feet, which no one had ever been able to catch up to during her lifetime, resembled the running of a beast with her body bent forward at an extreme angle.

In a single breath, Archer of Red crossed a vast distance that was impossible for humans to cross even with all their diligent research and training. At her approach, Ruler held her flag ready—and the two of them glared at each other.

“I'm going, to kill you.”

That repulsive, hate-filled voice belonged to Archer of Red.

“—Unfortunately, that's impossible.”

And Ruler replied with a great solemnness, as if to stamp out that hatred.

This was how the fight between the two female Servants began.

“You have your back to the wall now, Archer of Black!”

As Rider of Red's booming words echoed through the sky, Archer of Black smiled coolly and shot an arrow. However, Rider's chariot closed in on Archer faster than the arrow could reach him.

From the start, it was a battle Archer had no chance of winning. There was no way a bowman who had to fight at long range could stand up to a mounted warrior who could close the distance between them to point blank range in an instant.

—However, Archer of Black wasn't a bowman who was *limited to fighting at long range*.

Even if one possessed the fastest speed, there was a drawback that accompanied it.

"The proper time, the proper coordinates, and the proper speed—those are the only things I need."

Archer knew the speed of his arrows.

He could calculate the time it took to reach its target.

And he could predict the coordinates it would pass through.

Then, if he could figure out the speed of the chariot as well, the rest would be simple. No matter how overwhelming fast the enemy was, he just had to fire his arrow before Rider moved.

This was a form of future sight, but it wasn't a particularly special skill. It was simply a technique naturally gained from accumulated training over time without being discouraged by setbacks and thorough calculation that predicted what would happen next.

"What—!?"

However, from Rider of Red's perspective, it was just as if the arrow had suddenly appeared before his eyes. Right after Archer had shot the previous arrow, he'd shot another arrow at the coordinates Rider would definitely pass through. It truly was a nightmarish situation for Rider.

The arrow hadn't been fired after Rider moved.

Rather, *Rider had moved to the coordinates that the arrow passed through—*

There was no way for him to dodge. It was as if Rider had moved to stand in the bull's eye himself.

Blood gushed out as the arrow pierced his shoulder. The arrow penetrated down to his bone.

“Tch...!!”

Rider of Red pulled out the arrow and glared at Archer of Black, who had already swiftly moved to a different plane. He steered his horses to chase after him—and immediately after, the head of his horse Pedasos jolted.

“What!?”

Two of Rider’s three steeds were immortal divine horses. However the third one—Pedasos—was a famous horse who was legendary for his swift feet, but was not immortal. A single arrow had pierced Pedasos’ head, where his spiritual core was located. Even if the horse was a Noble Phantasm, this killing blow forced him to vanish and die.

Gritting his teeth, Rider of Red glared at Archer of Black.

His options were limited now. If he continued to destroy the airplanes with his now two-steed chariot, he could easily force the enemies to withdraw. Most likely, Rider of Black alone would remain with his hippogriff, but Archer of Red could probably shoot him down without much trouble.

However—this was *only if Rider of Red was able to destroy all the planes*.

His actions were anticipated. After the battles in the open field, in the forest and now in the air, Archer of Black could predict what he would do with virtually perfect accuracy.

That presented a much bigger problem. However—was it really best to discard this current situation in the air that was overwhelmingly advantageous for him?

As his thoughts pondered over his options in the span of an instant, his instincts as a warrior whispered to him.

You don’t need to ride your chariot. You’re a warrior stronger than anyone else.

“—Xanthus, Balius. You’ve done enough. Leave.”

He lightly tapped the heads of his horses. The horse called Xanthus turned to face his master and opened his mouth.

“That’s a wide decision, my master. If you continue to fly through the air in this chariot, you will eventually end up facing the same fate as back then.”

Xanthus had been given the ability to understand and even speak human language by a certain goddess. However—

“Hmph. Then you mean to say that what I’m about to do is the right choice?”

“Who knows? I don’t know such things. I only know which choice *will lead to your death if you do nothing.*”

However, his personality was completely rotten.

As Xanthus let out a laughing neigh, Rider hit him with the butt end of his spear. After letting out a shriek, Xanthus vanished along with Balius in a clearly exaggerated manner. And that was it. Having discarded his overwhelming advantage in the air, Rider of Red jumped down to the plane where Archer of Black was with only his spear in hand.

The jumbo jet was at an altitude that would make any normal human lose consciousness, but the two heroes stood on it unperturbed as they finally faced each other directly for the second time in this war.

The two Servants slowly began to walk over the steel roof to approach each other. Then, Rider of Red let out a hearty laugh that seemed to blow away the wind itself and asked a question.

“Now then. Did you already predict that I would come stand here, sensei? Or is this outside of your calculations?”

In response, Archer of Black smiled calmly. However, he already had an arrow nocked on his bow. If Rider tried to leap at him, he would instantly sense it and shoot the arrow. Meanwhile, Rider was waiting for an opening to attack. Depending on the situation, he would leap forward in an instant.

They were at a stalemate—but it wouldn’t last long. There was no way they would be able to hold themselves back from the feast before their eyes after they had waited so long for this moment. Keeping his ferocious and eager fangs at bay for the time being, Rider of Red waited for the answer to his question.

Archer of Black spoke up.

“Hmm, who knows? Though I did think it *might come to this*.”

“If possible, I hope that this was outside your calculations. I’m tired of having my path decided by the gods. This time, it doesn’t matter whether my side is right or not. I’m fighting because I want to fight.”

“So that’s why you sided with Shirou Kotomine... no, Amakusa Shirou Tokisada? And chose to help accomplish that absurd, delusional dream?”

Archer of Black’s gaze was stern. Amakusa Shirou had spoken of the pipe dream of ‘saving humanity’—and yet Rider had overlooked the absurdity of it and chosen to help him. Before he had his showdown with Rider of Red, Archer had to question him on this matter at least as his teacher.

But Rider refuted his words in a firm tone.

“It’s true that it’s an absurd dream. *But it can be done*. At the very least, we were convinced so after hearing our Master’s explanation.”

“Don’t be foolish. Something like saving humanity—”

“With his method, it’s possible... It really is a plan that’s worthy of the word ‘salvation’. He doesn’t intend to annihilate humanity, select the chosen from the unchosen, or destroy anything. It truly is a method you’d expect from a saint.”

Unlike his usual calm attitude, Archer’s voice turned heated.

“There’s no way such a method exists! It’s something many sages, heroes and saints have continued to search for and piled up various thoughts and actions to achieve without any success! Even if he’s a saint, Amakusa Shirou Tokisada shouldn’t be able to achieve it either!”

Rider of Red waved his spear and pointed straight at the Hanging Gardens.

“It’s possible—using the *Fuyuki* Greater Grail, sensei.”

When summoned to this world, each Servant had been granted some general knowledge about the Holy Grail besides common knowledge about the current era. Archer of Black in particular had managed to figure out the Greater Grail's original purpose with his great discernment.

Using his vast knowledge, Archer dissected Rider's words, connected the information and constructed a conclusion.

The Holy Grail War, and its origin and source.

The three familiars who had created the Holy Grail, the Einzberns, Tohsaka and Makiri. Their true objective.

The Greater Grail... and its true power.

Seven Servants, and the true meaning behind that number.

And the five Outsiders² who still existed even in the modern era—

Archer turned speechless.

Everything led to one conclusion. It was *impossible*. Impossible, but...

That might actually *bring about the salvation of humanity*

"...It, can't be..."

Archer of Black involuntarily let those words slip out—while Rider of Red laughed.

Perhaps swimming would be a better analogy for what he was doing than walking. In any case, Shirou Kotomine determinedly advanced while feeling as if his skin was being peeled off and his flesh was meting away.

This place wasn't within the Hanging Gardens. The interior of the Greater Grail was a space separate from the real world. Physical laws, the laws of magecraft and even *himself* were mixed and churned together to form something else entirely.

2. Here, it says "Outsider" in furigana above and "crystallization of abnormality" in kanji below.

However, his arms hurt to the point of grating—that alone allowed him to maintain his awareness of himself as Amakusa Shirou Tokisada. Shirou felt relieved that he'd been right to connect to the Greater Grail beforehand for the sake of obtaining the Grail's prana supply. If he had plunged into this abnormal space with no countermeasures, he would have dissolved away in an instant.

His arms continued to cry out in pain. But that pain was what connected his sense of self to reality.

The world was still filled with pain and anguish.

To indulge in pleasure all by himself was truly the act of a fool.

Shirou Kotomine desperately focused on maintaining his self-awareness. He remained conscious of the fact that he was within the Greater Grail, which had no sense of place or direction, and kept walking towards the other side of this space.

By establishing a landmark, a path was created. Shirou believed that that path would lead to his destination.

The path was long and far, with no end in sight.

He felt like he could hear whispers that kept saying "Give up and break"—but he withstood the temptation. In the end, it didn't matter whether you were a Servant or human in this place.

Even if he had all the power possible for a human to possess, it made no difference. Even if he could cut through dimensions and jump across space, there was no way to progress down this path except by walking.

And merely walking—wasn't enough either.

He was the one who determined the destination, and *he was also the one who determined where the goal was.*

He believed he would definitely reach it, and he had a wish that he would definitely accomplish, so he walked.

It was an extraordinary distance. A distance that might even be infinite. And there was even the fear that he might be walking in the opposite direction without realizing it.

But he threw all those feelings away like garbage.

"I'll walk, no matter where the destination may be, and no matter how long it takes."

He took one step. He took a second step. He took a third step without hesitation. He didn't care if he had to walk a hundred thousand leagues, walk up a ninety degree slope, or walk a path of thorns.

He had already resolved himself for all that long ago.

His father, mother, older sister and his massacred thirty-seven thousand followers tried to stop him.

"Listen to us," they said. Their voices called out to Shirou from behind.

— You'll feel a bit better if you stop. So stop. And please listen to us.

He rejected those words of sympathy. He denied the invitation to halt and come to a standstill. He blocked his hears so as not to hear them.

He had assumed that such voices temptation would bombard him. *If I waver here, your deaths will be for nothing.* With that thought, he shook them off.

There was no way that it wasn't painful and sorrowful for him.

Next, in place of the massacred behind him, their killers appeared before him. The strong who devoured the weak countless times throughout history. Using the shaky reason that *we and they are different*, they continued to kill other people.

They whispered to him with faint smiles.

"What's wrong? We killed them, you know? Your father, mother, comrades; we killed, killed and killed them all. *Don't you hate us?*"

The people behind him shouted out in sorrow and anger.

"They killed us. So please, *kill them in retribution!* Avenge us so that our souls can rest!"

Shirou remained silent. He didn't open his clenched fists. If he did — he felt like he would spit out something at the same time.

Of course he hated them. Of course he felt anger. He wanted to rip those smiles off their faces, stop their breathing and crush their hearts.

But—he had thrown away his sorrow and rage. He had decided that he wouldn't fight to give peace to the souls of his comrades, but to save everything instead.

He had thrown away forgiveness, compassion and love!

"You're in my way!"

His heart hurt as if it was being torn out. From the bottom of his heart, he wanted to hate himself for lending a hand to evil despite not being dyed in evil himself.

Even so. He wouldn't change his decision. The dice couldn't be taken back after being thrown.

There exists a method to save everything in this world. So I want you all to believe in me. It doesn't matter whether you're enemy or ally. Let's all head to that paradise which should lay beyond the horizon.

...However, he needed *its* power in order to save everything.

As long as humans remained the way they currently were, saving them was impossible. If ten people constructed a world, at least two people would be expelled from that world. A world made by ten people couldn't support all ten people.

By sacrificing two, eight received happiness. And that was the minimum limit; in reality, there were even times when nine people went through a path of hardship for the sake of one person's happiness.

This was the system of the human world, which should continue unchanged for eternity.

He was going to destroy that system. He would save the two sacrifices and the eight happy people alike. He would save both the one happy person and the nine people who struggled through hardship. In order to embark towards the heavens, a special power, a miracle was needed. And that is—

"That is the Cup of Heaven—Heaven's Feel. The final and ultimate Mystery for universally saving all of humanity. In other words, the Third Sorcery."

Shirou Kotomine at last laid hands upon humanity's salvation.

CHAPTER 4 END

Afterword: Commentary by Nasu Kinoko

At last, the war has reached the final battleground—seven thousand five hundred meters midair above the ground, a place that can't be reached by human hands.

The blue sky that encompasses their entire field of vision is endless, and the unseen, far-off ground exemplifies the limits of the human world.

There in the sky is a perfect world unclouded by anything. In this pure domain still yet untouched by civilization, an offering of condensed human wishes is now being consecrated.

It is the cup filled with desire.

The final wish of the broken-hearted.

That which grants a single wish while accumulating the wishes of many.

That which produces the one and only correct answer.

—No matter how much it is dyed in madness and despair.

A great war between fourteen Heroic Spirits. A multi-viewpoint, action-packed story centered around a Holy Grail War that surpasses the structure of the Holy Grail War. The [Fate: Hidashide-version], which went beyond a single Far East island country out into the world and which really feels like it went overboard in various ways, has finally reached its final volume.

While thinking that as long as Chiron-sensei and Semiramis-sama each got a happy end, I wouldn't even mind the obvious Laputa¹ jokes, I awaited the final manuscripts, but then—

“Kinoko. I told you it would be finished in four volumes. But that was a lie.”

With those words, Higashide “Commando” Yuuichirou then rudely hung up the phone.

This was on a certain January day in 2014.

But Kinoko understood. I'd already known it after looking at the plot a year earlier.

“That's why I told you that this wouldn't finish in four volumes!”

But it's too late to complain now.

Actually, most readers probably thought the same themselves.

So this volume count was pretty much expected. There's no point in being surprised. If you're going to be surprised by something, let it be at the actual contents of the book.

Like at how that Servant who everyone expected to go on a killing spree with Maria the Ripper ended up going in a shocking direction, or how the idea for boarding the Gardens ended up being a method that goes too far even for Hollywood and makes you think ‘Hey, do you know just how much money this would cost if this were a movie!?’.

Just between you and me, many of the developments in this volume weren't even in the initial plot. Even Mr. Higashide Yuuichirou probably didn't predict during the plotting stage that the story would get so crazy

1. Reference to Ghibli film “Castle in the Sky”.

and overblown.

Therefore, it was unavoidable that the volume count increased. After all, this is what they mean by the saying ‘stories are alive’. What lies ahead is an invisible domain that not even the narrator can imagine. A story that can’t be predicted even by its god, the author. What a wonderful thing that is. Don’t you think that’s what makes this a Final (Dead) Coaster² worthy of being an apocrypha that breaks all molds and conventions?

My acquaintance and relationship with Mr. Higashide Yuuichirou is actually quite long and deep.

It goes back fourteen years ago.

Right after TYPE-MOON had published the visual novel “Tsukihime”, we first met and talked at Tokyo Big Site’s western hall where lots of passion and excitement swirled. The doujinshi I received from him back then is still on my work shelf even now.

After that, Higashide Yuuichirou formally debuted with the PC game “Ayakashibito” and displayed talent and passion that you wouldn’t expect from a newcomer.

It fused Japanese romance with a shooting action game. It contained deep knowledge of horror films. It contained depictions of martial arts that left you on the edge of your seat. It had an extremely charming and fascinating relationship between teacher and student. It was a story of growing up and parting. It was a story with multiple character viewpoints that increased in depth the more you read through it. The game is hard to get a hold of these days, but it’s been ported and spread by consumers, so I highly recommend you play it. It is the undiluted embodiment of Higashide Yuuichirou’s writing at full speed. It is such a condensed piece of work that his strong and weak points practically squeak and grate against each other within it, truly a story that ‘expresses the soul of the writer’.

2. Final Dead Coaster is the Japanese name for the horror film “Final Destination”.

And after “Ayakashibito”, Mr. Higashide Yuuichirou continued to make other games like “Bullet Butlers” and “Evolimit”, and later moved on to work in the world of light novels.

I am both a fan of Higashide Yuuichirou and at the same time a producer who spreads the [Fate] brand, which has already grown beyond a single visual novel.

I want new blood. I want to see new possibilities. I couldn’t help wanting to see what would happen to [Fate] by introducing Higashide Yuuichirou into the mix, and I entrusted him to write this apocrypha.

I’m now reflecting on the results of that decision with the release of this fourth volume.

The different viewpoints and ways of life of two saints. The countless hells that exist in the real world and yet are ignored as if they were only natural. He recites their story while coldly depicting those grudges and lamentations.

I’ll tell you now. There is no salvation in this hell, It’s precisely because there is no salvation that this is hell, after all.

As those we have overlooked this, we mustn’t turn our eyes away from this truth and reality.

What lies beyond it? What will it produce? — And what meaning lies in it? We keep searching for those answers.

That is the story that only Higashide Yuuichirou can write, one that isn’t [stay], [Zero] or [EXTRA].

While confined to the [Fate] universe, Higashide Yuuichirou’s writing at last bared its fangs with this timing.

[Fate] is a story about both dreams and reality.

Those who were destroyed by reality within their dreams and ideals.

Those who drowned and wallowed in dreams and ideals within reality.

And those who sought for reality within the dream of the virtual world.

Though the order differed, all three stories were cameras that displayed those who “stood up once more after breaking”... Well, the main goal of their plots was the “fulfillment of wishes that couldn’t be granted”, so

naturally the protagonists all tasted failure and frustration.

The concept of not giving up or not being able to endure it and still holding out a hand even so; that is the starting point of [Fate].

Fate—a tragic destiny. In order to defeat and smash that huge, heaving wave that is beyond the capabilities of humans to resist.

No matter how much [Fate/Apocrypha] has diverged from the history of [stay night], that aspect remains unchanged.

Look at the light of the battle flag which runs across the blue sky.

This is the story of two saints.

The march of the young man who carried salvation to the extreme in the present era, and of the young woman who ascertained the salvation of the present era.

This is the story of the flags they each believe in and the utopias they each seek.

The Greater Grail is about to activate. At last, the young man's dream will take form.

—But will its final form be prosperity or vanity?

VOLUME 4 END